He looked at her just once, his grey eyes flashing a final, desperate command ...run.

The Harrow Star

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Ovi Pulp

The Harrow Star

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The sky was a raw wound. Over the drowned bones of Old Anvil, the Imperial flagship *Valediction* hung like a judge's hammer. Its brass hull wept acrid steam, and along its keel, chains of captive airships trailed like miserable penitents. Below, on the soot-blackened aerodrome, twelve-year-old Kaelen Shay watched her father kneel in the oil-slicked slush.

He was no hero. He was merely a shipyard riveter with ash clogging his lungs and a useless prayer on his lips. The Imperator's Inquisitor, a man with a face like a clenched fist and eyes of cold flint, unfurled a heavy bronze warrant.

"For the treasonous crime of unlicensed cloud-scavenging," the Inquisitor bellowed, his voice cutting through the hiss of hydraulic pressure, "your life is forfeit to the Crown."

Kaelen's father did not beg. He looked at her just once, his grey eyes flashing a final, desperate command ...*run*.

She did not. She stood frozen as the pneumatic steam-lance punched through his chest in a spray of heat and copper. Only when his body collapsed onto the iron grates did the spell break. Then, she ran.

That was eight years ago.

Now, at twenty, Kaelen Shay was a ghost on the wind, a phantom of the lower atmosphere. She had traded her childhood tears for grease-stained knuckles and a stolen flight suit. She had become a pilot so razor-sharp, so utterly fearless, that she could thread a needle with a light skiff between the overlapping broadsides of two Imperial cruisers without scratching her paintwork. The sky was no longer a place of terror; it was her sanctuary, and her weapon.

She had spent nearly a decade surviving on the fringes, salvaging the wreckage of a broken world, but

she had never forgotten the shadow of the *Valediction*. Every roaring furnace, every hiss of escaping pressure, and every flash of bronze in the sun reminded her of the blood on the aerodrome floor. She had not just survived; she had prepared. She had learned the patrol routes, memorised the blind spots in the Imperial radar networks, and gathered a crew of fellow outcasts who had lost just as much to the Imperator's greed.

Kaelen had a sacred promise to keep, whispered into the howling gales of the upper reach. She was going to slip past the blockade, infiltrate the sanctum of the high command and steal the *Harrow Star,* the Empire's mythic, irreplaceable navigation relic. Without it, their tyrannical armada would be left blind, foundering in the endless fog. She would watch their terrifying tyranny fall from the heavens like a shot goshawk.

1. The wrong kind of lightning

The aether tore open over the Rustwall Rifts.

It was not the pale, flickering violet of a normal high-altitude squall, but a jagged, bleeding crimson that smelled scorched and metallic. Kaelen Shay spat a mouthful of copper-tasting air and wrestled with the *Tin Queen's* helm. The scavenger skiff shuddered as a secondary pulse scored the under-clouds, the shockwave rattling the brass rivets in the control console.

"Bloody hell," Kaelen hissed, a curse she had inherited from her father, along with the skiff and a permanent ache in her left shoulder. She yanked the secondary trim lever. The skiff heeled violently to port, her stained silkfin sails groaning as they bled off excess pressure.

Below them, the fog was a shifting grey sea, pierced by the jagged bones of a dead world. The Rifts were a vertical graveyard of pre-imperial metropolises, where shattered spires and iron-girded towers rose like broken teeth. It was a treacherous maze, but it was the only place a rogue scavenger could find high-grade old-world copper and optical wire.

"You're bleeding altitude, Kaelen!" A voice crackled through the copper speaking tube beside her ear. In the aft observation blister, Darrow was likely clutching his charts like a prayer book. The lanky former monastery scholar tapped a cracked barometer. "And we have company. Five o'clock low, breaking through the lower thermal layer."

Kaelen didn't turn around to look. She didn't need to. She could already feel them, a deep, rhythmic thrum that vibrated through the soles of her boots and into her teeth. It was the heavy, predatory throb of Imperial corvette engines.

The Empire didn't hunt with eyes; they hunted with sound. Their sleek scout ships were mounted with massive acoustic arrays, brass ears capable of picking up the heartbeat of a frightened scavenger from two miles away.

"How many, Darrow?" she called back, her knuckles white on the throttle.

"Three. No, wait ...four," Darrow's voice went up an octave. "They're circling like reef-sharks, Kaelen. They've caught our wake-turbulence."

"Then we stop being meat."

With a grim set to her jaw, Kaelen kicked the rudder pedal and shoved the throttle forward, forcing the *Tin Queen* into a brutal, vertical stall. The skiff's iron spine shrieked in protest. For a sickening, weightless second, they hung motionless against the bleeding sky. Through her floor-viewports, Kaelen caught a flash of the hunters below: sleek, obsidian-painted hulls, their prow-rams carved into the likeness of snarling raptor beaks.

Before the corvettes could adjust their acoustic dishes, Kaelen slammed the vent valves, cutting the lift-gas to the port stabilizer cells. The *Tin Queen* didn't just dive; she dropped like a lead weight straight into the Rifts' suffocating fog.

"We're going to hit a spire!" Darrow screamed through the tube.

"Trust the ship, Darrow!" Kaelen yelled back.

In truth, she didn't entirely trust herself, but she trusted the *Tin Queen's* bones. Her father had reinforced the hull with salvaged dreadnought ribs. They plunged blindly through the soup, past skeletal suspension bridges that loomed out of the mist like giant webs, and shattered clock-faces the size of country manors.

Above them, the Imperial captains hesitated. They were operating heavy navy vessels; their captains feared the unpredictable thermals and razor-sharp iron of the Rifts far more than they wanted a single, low-rent scavenger. The thrumming of their engines began to fade, muffled by the dense, damp air.

Kaelen levelled off a mere twenty feet above a narrow canyon of rusted, pre-imperial railcars. The fog swallowed them completely. She released a long, shaky breath, wiping a mix of engine grease and condensation from her forehead.

Then, a new sound cut through the silence.

It wasn't the heavy roar of the military, but a low, mocking whistle from directly above. A massive shadow eclipsed the *Tin Queen*. This ship was different... long, predatory, and painted the deep blue-black of

a fresh bruise. Its canvas sails were black as soot, and its brass fittings were tarnished to a dull dullness. The nameplate on its prow read: *Crow's Fortune*.

Before Kaelen could even reach for her flare pistol, the shadow ship veered dangerously close. From its open bow ramp, a figure dropped. He fell twenty feet through the air, landing on the *Tin Queen's* forward deck with the effortless grace of a falling knife.

Kaelen braced herself, keeping one hand on the throttle and the other dropping to the heavy iron wrench at her belt.

The intruder straightened up. He was young, perhaps twenty-five, with a jagged white scar splitting his left eyebrow and a confident smirk that practically screamed *I've already won*. He wore a flamboyant sky pirate's coat, stolen Imperial wool, lined with expensive white weasel fur and carried no visible pistol or blade. That arrogance alone made him terrifying.

"Kaelen Shay," he said, his voice easily carrying over the idling hiss of her engines. "You fly like you're being followed. Which you are, technically. But not by those slow-witted Imperial dogs." He jerked a leather-gloved thumb skyward. "By me."

"I don't know you," Kaelen said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline hammering in her ribs. "And you're trespassing on my deck."

"No, you don't know me. But you know my captain," the youth said, taking a casual step forward. "The name's Rennick. I'm the recruiter."

With a flick of his wrist, he tossed something through the open cockpit window. Kaelen caught it out of reflex. It was a heavy brass cylinder, a military-grade message tube, sealed with thick black wax.

"Read it," Rennick said, stepping backward toward the edge of the moving deck without looking. "Then decide if you want to spend the rest of your short life running from the Empire, or if you're ready to start cutting its throat."

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped off the deck into the open air. Kaelen gasped, rushing to the rail, only to see the *Crow's Fortune* swoop underneath, catching him perfectly on an extended cargo netting. The black-sailed ship tilted its wings in a mocking salute and vanished into the canyon fog.

Darrow crawled up from the aft hatch, his face the colour of curdled milk. "What in the heavens was that? Was that a pirate?"

Kaelen didn't answer. She used her thumb to snap the black wax seal of the cylinder. Inside was a single sheet of heavy parchment, handwritten in a sharp, angry script that looked as though it had been etched with a dagger.

The Harrow Star is real. It's being kept in the Vault of Cirrus, four thousand feet above the Imperial Seat. I have the map. You have the hands and the ship. Come to the Spire Market at moonrise. Don't be late.

—M. Vesper, Captain of the Mortal Scratch.

Kaelen read the letter twice, her eyes lingering on the words *Harrow Star,* the mythical pre-imperial compass said to map the currents of the deep aether. She let out a dry, broken laugh. Her father had died just trying to scrape a living from the salvage of the old world. Now, a madman was asking her to steal a god's relic from the emperor's own sky-fortress.

"What does it say?" Darrow asked anxiously, looking over her shoulder.

Kaelen shoved the note into her pocket and gripped the steering wheel with renewed ferocity.

"Turn us east," she commanded. "We're charting a course for the Spire Market."

Darrow blinked in horror. "The Spire Market? Kaelen, that's lawless territory. It's entirely controlled by the pirate fleets!"

"Good," Kaelen said, a fierce, unfamiliar spark igniting in her chest as she slammed the throttle forward, feeding the *Tin Queen* a fresh blast of lift-gas. "I'm tired of being prey."

2. The spire market

The Spire Market was a lawless bazaar lashed to the rusted underside of an abandoned imperial sky-dock, suspended three thousand feet above the mist-choked abyss. It was a chaotic quarter-mile of patched tarpaulins, forged mooring rings creaking under immense strain, and the thick, greasy smell of roasted cloud-eel dripping into open fires.

Kaelen had heard the tavern tall tales back in the low-lands, stories of pickpockets who could lift your leather belt without unclasping the buckle, fence-brokers who dealt exclusively in illicit, glowing gravity crystals and at least three distinct species of airborne fungus that induced terrifyingly accurate prophetic dreams. She hadn't, however, expected the music.

A one-armed woman sat perched on a stack of rotting cargo crates, playing a harp expertly fashioned from frayed rigging wire. Her voice was a low, mournful threnody about an ancient captain who had sold her entire crew just to purchase a singular, legendary engine. Kaelen dropped a tarnished copper piece into the woman's battered felt hat and kept walking, her boots clicking against the damp wooden decking.

Darrow stayed close at her flank, his nervous gaze darting between the shadowed stalls. His hand was buried deep inside his heavy canvas coat, wrapped tightly around a disassembler's wrench, his rather pathetic idea of a weapon.

"Keep your head down," Kaelen muttered, pulling her goggles down around her neck. "This isn't the scrap-yards. These people kill for the brass buttons on your waistcoat."

"I am entirely aware of the peril, Kaelen," Darrow whispered back, his teeth chattering slightly from the biting high-altitude wind. "Which is precisely why we should have brought something that fires actual bullets."

The *Mortal Scratch* was easy to find. It utterly dominated the market's eastern mooring, a predatory sil-

houette against the bruising twilight sky. She was a frigate-class raider, her hull aggressively patched with a dozen different grades of salvaged metal, and her massive silk envelope painted with a single, jagged white scratch across a solid black field—like a knife cut through the night.

Three crew members stood guard at the foot of the gangplank, watching the crowd with casual malice. One was a hulking woman with heavy augmetic lungs; intricate brass grilles were set directly over her ribs, whistling and clicking softly as she drew breath. Beside her stood a rail-thin youth with six nimble fingers on each hand, casually tuning a heavy repeating crossbow. The third was Rennick, a scarred smuggler Kaelen had unfortunately crossed paths with in her teenage years.

"She actually came," Rennick said, his voice dripping with mild amusement. He didn't look surprised. "Captain's waiting in the wardroom. Leave the monk outside."

Darrow stepped forward, his face flushing red. "I am an ordained scholar of the..."

Kaelen caught his arm, her grip iron-tight. "Wait here, Darrow. If I'm not back within the hour, take the *Tin Queen* and fly home."

"Home's a smoking crater, Kaelen," Darrow muttered, though he stepped back, deflating. "But very well. Don't do anything remarkably foolish."

"No promises," Kaelen said, stepping onto the swaying gangplank.

The wardroom of the *Mortal Scratch* was less an officer's cabin and more a cathedral of meticulous salvage. Smuggled charts covered every available surface, not just standard cloud-current projections, but classified political maps, detailed architectural blueprints of imperial outposts, and a massive, hand-annotated drawing of the Imperial Seat's inner keep. A single oil lamp swung from the ceiling, casting long, dancing shadows across the steel ribs of the ship.

In the center of the room, sitting comfortably atop a wooden crate stencilled with warnings for volatile incendiaries, was Captain M. Vesper.

She was not at all what Kaelen had anticipated. Vesper was small, perhaps forty years of age, with iron-gray hair cropped brutally close to her skull. Her face looked as though it had been carved directly from a northern glacier, all sharp, unyielding angles and pale skin. She wore a standard Imperial flight jacket, faded, oil-stained, and patched, with the official insignia

violently burned off the shoulder. Her left hand was gloved in pristine black silk; she kept it resting flat against her knee.

"Kaelen Shay," Vesper said. Her voice was low, precise, and carried the chilling weight of absolute authority. "Daughter of Vellen Shay, executed by public hanging for illegal scavenging in the eighth year of the Imperator's Ascension. Since then, you've flown treacherous courier runs for the Smokefall Rebels, stolen three Imperial supply skiffs from under their noses, and once spectacularly outran an ironclad dreadnought through the Toothstorm Trench. Am I missing anything of note?"

Kaelen remained standing, refusing to look at the empty chair across from the Captain. "You missed the part where I'm not interested in your suicide mission, Captain."

Vesper smiled. It was a cold, fleeting movement of the lips that didn't come close to reaching her eyes. "The Harrow Star isn't some drunkard's myth, girl. It's a pristine, pre-imperial navigation core—a masterwork device that reads the aether's own magnetic language. With it in our possession, we can map every safe corridor, every hidden altitude, and every blind spot the

Empire uses to control these skies. We can turn their grand tyranny into a cage they can never escape."

Kaelen crossed her arms, her eyes narrowing. "And you're just going to hand that kind of power over to the Rebels? Out of the goodness of your heart?"

"I'm giving it to the sky," Vesper replied, her voice hardening. "Let everyone navigate free, or let no one. That is the terms of the deal."

Kaelen stood in the quiet room, the ghosts of her past rising up in the silence. She thought of her father's ash-blackened lungs, ruined by the imperial penal mines. She thought of the cold, aristocratic face of the Inquisitor who had signed the death warrant.

"What's the catch?" Kaelen asked quietly. "A prize like that isn't just sitting on a shelf."

"The Vault of Cirrus is shielded by an active resonance lock, a complex harmonic frequency that shifts randomly every six seconds," Vesper explained, leaning forward, her black-gloved hand tightening into a fist. "We need a pilot who can hold a skiff perfectly, impossibly still inside a rotating pressure field while three of us crack the physical vault. One wrong move, one inch of drift, and the whole mechanism implodes.

We become nothing more than a fine red mist in the upper atmosphere."

Kaelen stared at her. "Why me? There are a hundred veteran blockade-runners in the Spire Market right now."

Vesper's eyes locked onto hers with predatory intensity. "Because you're angry enough to be steady. Wealthy pilots get soft. Desperate pilots get reckless. But angry people? Angry people don't flinch when the pressure mounts."

Kaelen stood in silence for a long, agonizing moment. Through the open porthole, the distant music of the market drifted into the wardroom. The one-armed harpist had begun a new song, this one a fierce, driving ballad about a girl who watched her father die and decided to burn the entire world down to the bedrock.

A slow corner of Kaelen's mouth tugged upward. "I'll need a significantly better ship than the *Tin Queen* if we're going to survive the atmospheric shear."

Vesper's glacier-face finally cracked into a genuine, brilliant smile. She stood up and extended her right hand. "Welcome to the *Mortal Scratch*, Pilot. We leave at dawn."

3. The crew of the damned

Dawn over the Spire Market was a lie. The sun never truly reached this altitude; it leaked through the sulphurous cloud layers like weak, over-steeped tea. Kaelen stood on the foredeck of the *Mortal Scratch*, her boots vibrating with the low, rhythmic thrum of the anti-grav ambient drives. She watched the rest of the crew assemble for the first time, each silhouette emerging from the greasy smog like ghosts taking flesh.

Vesper gathered them in the mess, a claustrophobic space dominated by a scarred, bolted-down iron table and a rusted shrine to a dead god none of them

believed in, its glass eyes long since pried out by desperate scavengers. There were seven of them total. A perfect, unlucky prime.

Vesper stood at the head of the table. She was the captain, the strategist, and the only person on board who'd actually laid eyes on the *Harrow Star's* forbidden schematics. Her gloved left hand never left her trench coat pocket, concealing the clockwork prosthesis that clicked faintly whenever she grew impatient.

To her right lounged Rennick, first mate, recruiter, and the ship's premier knife-fighter. He possessed the lean, predatory grace of an alley cat and had a maddening habit of cleaning his fingernails with a notched throwing blade during briefings, the steel making a sharp *scritch-scritch* sound against the wood.

Opposite him loomed Oren, a hulking woman whose torso was encased in a tarnished brass ribcage. She was the engineer, a whisperer of dying engines, who communicated mostly in deep, guttural grunts and the wet, mechanical whistle of her augmetic lungs exhaling steam.

Beside her sat Six, the six-fingered youth. He was the lockpick, the forger, and a thief of such terrifying talent he could allegedly steal a man's pocket watch

while shaking his hand. He huddled in an oversized coat, his eyes darting across the room, never speaking above a raspy whisper.

Dr. Hesh leaned against the bulkhead, a former Imperial surgeon with a cracked glass eye that stared perpetually at the ceiling and a well-documented morphine addiction that kept his hands from shaking. He patched them up, kept the ship's medical log in elegant, sweeping script, and brewed an illegal coffee substitute that tasted like burnt rubber and kept a person awake for three days straight.

Then there was Marrow, the navigator. He was ancient, possibly seventy, his shaved head entirely tattooed with outlawed constellation maps that shifted slightly under his wrinkled skin. He'd been a prisoner in the Imperial Seat's deepest dungeons for fifteen years until Vesper orchestrated his bloody breakout. He knew the Vault's layout better than its own architects.

And finally, Kaelen, the pilot. The outsider. The sceptic who actually understood how gravity liked to tear ships apart.

"Here's the shape of it," Vesper said, her voice cutting through the damp chill. She unrolled a heavy can-

vas chart across the table. It detailed the Imperial Seat, a monolithic, floating fortress the size of a mountain, ringed by three concentric defensive walls bristling with interlocking gun batteries. "The Vault is buried deep within the Seat's bedrock keel, two hundred feet directly below the Emperor's throne room. We go in from below."

Marrow leaned forward, tracing a jagged line with a gnarled, dirt-caked finger. "There's a waste vent here. An old pre-Imperial sewage duct. It empties into the lower atmosphere once every standard week to clear the lower sectors. We ride the toxic outflow upward, then cut directly into the Vault's service crawlspace before the pressure valves slam shut."

"That's absolute suicide," Kaelen interrupted, crossing her arms. "The pressure differential alone inside a sealed vent that size would crush most skiffs into a tin can. We'd be flattened before we even hit the first junction."

Oren grunted. It was a sharp, positive grunt, accompanied by a hiss of steam from her collar.

"Oren's spent the last three days reinforcing the internal hull with a flexible spider-silk composite," Ves-

per explained calmly, looking directly at Kaelen. "The framing will hold, Kaelen. The real variable isn't the ship; it's the pilot. Can you hold the *Scratch* steady against a five-hundred-mile-per-hour toxic updraft while the breach team cuts through the secondary plating?"

Kaelen leaned over the table, studying the terrifying geometry of the chart. The waste vent was a vertical, pitch-black shaft three miles long, lined with century-old rust, jagged structural debris, and god only knew what kind of compacted filth. The *Mortal Scratch* wouldn't just be flying; she would be a fragile wooden cork trapped inside a roaring geyser.

"I can do it," Kaelen said, her jaw tight. "But your breach team had better be faster than God."

"We're always fast," Six whispered, his six fingers dancing a silent rhythm against his knee.

Rennick laughed, a sharp, cynical bark that ended in a smirk. "We're always late, too. But that's all part of the charm, isn't it, sweetheart?"

Dr. Hesh poured himself a fresh cup of his terrible, oily coffee, the smell of burnt tar filling the cramped mess. "I should casually note," he said, tapping his

glass eye with a fingernail, "that the Imperial Seat's permanent garrison includes three thousand conscripted soldiers, sixty automated gun towers, and a dedicated contingent of Inquisitors trained to detect a lie simply by the rhythm of your heartbeat. We'll be outnumbered, catastrophically outgunned, and if we're caught alive, they will execute us in ways that make the old martyrdom stories look positively merciful."

Vesper didn't blink. She simply scanned the faces of her crew, her expression as unyielding as iron. "Any other burning objections?"

No one spoke. The only sound was the low, rhythmic wheeze of Oren's brass lungs.

"Then we fly," Vesper said, rolling up the map with a decisive snap. "For the *Harrow Star*. For a sky without chains. And for every poor bastard of a riveter who died on their knees building that monstrosity."

Kaelen felt something hot and unfamiliar lodge itself behind her ribs. It wasn't hope, she'd ruthlessly killed off hope years ago in the lower gutters of the Spire. It was something rawer, heavier: a mutual promise of survival, or a shared grave.

They cast off precisely at noon. The heavy iron mooring lines dropped away into the fog, and the *Mortal Scratch* rose silently into the bruised, smog-choked sky like a jagged knife drawn from a velvet sheath.

4. The waste vent

The Imperial Seat appeared on the third day, a dark smudge on the horizon that grew into a leviathan. It possessed no single hull, no simple architecture. Instead, it was a sprawling agglomeration of Gothic towers, skeletal bridges, bristling gun platforms, and tiered habitation domes, all lashed together with rusted iron and immense hubris. At its dead center rose the Obsidian Spire, where the Imperator dwelled in absolute isolation. Below it, entirely invisible from above, hung the keel: a mile-long spine of jagged black stone, carved out of the heart of a captured asteroid.

The waste vent was a festering wound in that stone. Marrow guided them through a shifting maze of high-altitude cloud cover, slipping past patrol skiffs that never saw them through the grey soup. When they finally broke through the vapour, the *Mortal Scratch* hovered over a circular shaft three hundred feet wide, plunging straight down into the asteroid's belly. The stench rose from the abyss in hot, sickening waves: rotting organics, chemical runoff, and something sharply metallic that stung the eyes and coated the throat.

"Pressure cycle starts in twenty minutes," Marrow said, tapping the cracked glass of his mechanical chronometer. The brass gears clicked with a sound like a ticking insect. "We go up against the tail end of the first surge. After that, the vent goes dormant for six days. If we're not out by then, the seals lock down and we suffocate in the dark."

Kaelen took the pilot's chair, her fingers tightening on the cold iron grips. The controls of the *Mortal Scratch* were far heavier than those of her old ship, the *Tin Queen,* there was more inertia here, more raw muscle required to make the vessel obey. She wrapped her hands around the primary altitude levers and took a slow, grounding breath, blocking out the stench.

"Oren," she called out, her voice tight. "Thrusters at ten percent. I want neutral buoyancy before we drop."

Oren whistled through her brass lungs, a low, melodic chord of pressurized steam that signalled assent. The deckplates vibrated as the engines hummed to life, fighting the erratic updrafts.

Below them, deep within the throat of the vent, something ancient and massive groaned. Then the surge came, a roaring column of pressurized air, toxic vapour, and industrial waste shooting upward like the final breath of a dying world. The *Mortal Scratch* bucked violently, her nose dipping toward the chasm. Kaelen slammed her weight against the levers, feeding in counter-thrust to hold them steady at the very lip of the vent. The engines shrieked in protest.

"Now," Vesper commanded, leaning over Kaelen's shoulder, her eyes fixed on the churning vortex below. "Down. Before the backdraft pulls us apart."

Kaelen tilted the nose. They dropped like a stone into the shaft.

Total darkness swallowed them instantly. The only light came from the ship's external running lamps, which painted the wet, ribbed walls of the vent in a

sickly, jaundice yellow. The upward surge caught them hard, shoving against the hull; Kaelen fought the controls like a wild animal, using the manoeuvring thrusters to keep the vessel from flipping entirely upside down. The iron framework groaned around them, a chorus of screaming metal. Oren's brass lungs whistled a frantic, panicky counterpoint in the corner of the cockpit.

"Altitude dropping," Marrow called out, his voice eerily calm against the din as he stared at the altimeter. "We're at six hundred feet below the keel. Five hundred. Four..."

A rivet popped near the main viewport with the sound of a pistol shot, ricocheting off the bulkhead. Then another. The *Mortal Scratch* shook like a dying beast in the clutches of a predator.

"Three hundred," Marrow continued, unblinking. "Two hundred. One hundred. Now, Kaelen!"

Kaelen threw the engines into full reverse. The ship halted with a violent, bone-snapping jolt that threw everyone sideways against their harnesses. They hung suspended in the trembling vent, surrounded by dripping rust, hissing steam, and the low, rumbling echoes of distant industrial thunder.

Vesper was already unbuckled, crouching at the starboard side hatch and peering through the brass optics of a periscope. “We’re level with the service crawlspace. Six, you’re up. Move.”

Six slithered out of the hatch and onto the slick vent wall. His extra, genetic-glitched fingers found holds in the corroded iron where no normal human could ever cling. He worked in absolute, tense silence for ten minutes, his tools scraping faintly against the stone. Then, with a sharp hiss of stale, pressurized air, a concealed section of the wall swung inward.

“Crawlspace’s clear,” Six whispered back through the comm-tube, his voice raspy. “But we’ve got a massive problem. The Vault’s resonance lock is live. I can hear the hum from here, it’s changing pitch every four seconds, not six. The schematics we stole are wrong.”

Vesper’s face went entirely pale under the yellow glare of the console lights. “How wrong?”

“Wrong enough that we have exactly two seconds to breach the secondary seals instead of ten,” Six said. “Any error, and the alarm sounds across the entire sector.”

Kaelen peered through the hatch at the crawlspace, a dark, claustrophobic tunnel dripping with greasy condensation that would require them to crawl on their bellies for a hundred agonizing yards. At the end of it lay the legendary artefact they had spent months hunting. And a timer that was already running out.

"I'm coming with you," Kaelen said, unbuckling her pilot's harness and stepping down. "If we have to be that fast, you'll need my hands to assist with the bypass."

Vesper hesitated, looking at Kaelen's grease-stained hands, then nodded sharply. "Rennick, you have the ship. Keep her hovering. If we're not back in thirty minutes, burn the thrusters, blow the vent seals, and get clear."

Rennick's scarred eyebrow rose as he gripped the co-pilot's wheel. "And leave you two down here to rot?"

"Yes," Vesper said, her voice dropping to a fierce, quiet whisper. "And leave us."

Without another word, Vesper dropped through the hatch into the narrow crawlspace, and Kaelen followed her instantly, plunging headfirst into the suffocating dark.

5. The resonance lock

The crawlspace was a throat of cold, rusted iron, smelling of ancient grease and the bitter tang of ozone. Kaelen slithered on her elbows, her father's old flight goggles pressed tight against her face. The rubber seal chafed her skin, trapping the heat of her own ragged breathing until the lenses fogged. Every exhale sounded deafeningly loud in the claustrophobic dark.

Ahead of her, Vesper moved with the fluid economy of a woman who had spent a lifetime crawling through the underbellies of starships and forgotten fortresses. Behind Kaelen, the heavy, rhythmic scraping of boots signalled that Six and Marrow were bringing up the rear, their gear clinking softly despite their best efforts.

The resonance lock's frequency pulsed through the metal framework of the ventilation shaft, a low, oscillating hum that changed pitch every four seconds, precisely as Six had predicted. Bass to tenor to bass. It was less of a sound and more of a physical invasion; Kaelen felt the vibration vibrating deep in her molars and rattling the back of her skull.

"Keep moving," Vesper's voice drifted back, a low, sandpaper whisper. "If the patrol schedule holds, we have exactly three minutes before the guard rotation hits the lower corridor."

They finally spilled out into a narrow junction where the shaft widened slightly. Perched there was the Vault's primary access panel: a circular hatch the size of a dinner plate, etched with intricate, swirling pre-imperial glyphs that seemed to shimmer faintly in the dark.

Six scrambled forward, squeezing past Kaelen with an apologetic murmur. He pressed his ear flat against the cold metal, his elongated left hand, boasting six slender, hyper-articulated fingers, splayed wide across the glyphs.

"The harmonic sequence is a mathematical prime," Six whispered, his eyes rolling back slightly as he focused entirely on the acoustic feedback. "The Imperi-

al engineers layered a shifting algorithm beneath the standard acoustic seal. I can crack it, but I'll need to feel the micro-vibrations of the internal tumblers. One mistake, one mistimed touch, and the lock emits a concentrated burst of sonic force. Our brains will literally liquefy inside our skulls."

Vesper adjusted the collar of her dark duster, her expression unreadable in the shadows. "No pressure, then, sweetheart. Just don't make us a cautionary tale."

Six swallowed hard and went to work. His fingers moved across the circular panel like pale spiders, tapping the ancient glyphs in a complex, stuttering rhythm that perfectly counterbalanced the changing pitch of the hum.

Tap-tap-tap... pause.

The hum shifted, rising to a piercing tenor.

Tap-tap.

Another shift, dropping back to a guttural bass.

Tap-tap-tap-tap.

Kaelen held her breath, her fingernails digging into the canvas of her trousers. The air in the shaft felt

suddenly thick, suffocating. Beside her, Marrow's hand rested on the hilt of his heavy slug-thrower, his knuckles white.

With a heavy, pneumatic *thunk*, the hatch clicked. The oppressive hum vanished instantly, replaced by the beautiful, profound silence of a vacuum seal breaking.

"Done," Six breathed, wiping a bead of sweat from his brow.

Then, the world turned red.

A klaxon shrieked from the darkness above, a piercing, two-tone wail that tore through the quiet. Crimson emergency lights flared to life down the length of the shaft, casting long, distorted shadows.

"Secondary lock!" Marrow hissed, his eyes widening in panic as he looked back the way they had come. "The schematics we bought off the black market didn't show a sodding secondary lock!"

A grinding screech of heavy machinery echoed through the structure. The corridor behind them began to seal. Massive, reinforced blast doors were dropping from the ceiling in a rapid chain reaction, one after another, systematically cutting off their retreat.

Vesper slammed her palm against the open access panel, looking down into the dark chute beyond it. "Six, override the failsafe! Shut that alarm down!"

"I'm trying! The feedback loop is rewriting itself!" The youth's extra fingers blurred across the interface, but the panel sparkled with angry blue sparks, rejecting his inputs.

Kaelen looked back over her shoulder. The third blast door had just slammed shut with an earth-shaking thud. The fourth was falling. They had maybe twenty seconds before the final door sealed them into this tiny metal box to wait for the Imperial cleanup crew. "We're not getting back to the ship, Vesper. The route is gone."

Vesper's jaw set into a hard line. "Then we go forward. There's no turning back now."

She drew a heavy breaching tool from her utility belt, a wicked, heated ceramic blade designed to shear through starship bulkheads. With a sharp flick of her wrist, she activated the power cell. The blade hissed, glowing a fierce, blinding orange.

"Marrow, Six, hold the line!" Vesper commanded as she jammed the superheated blade directly into the

hatch's inner seam. Sparks rained down around her like dying stars. "Kaelen, I need your strength. Pull!"

Kaelen gripped the hilt of the breaching tool alongside Vesper, her heavy leather-gloved hand shielding them from the worst of the heat. Together, they threw their weight into the lever action, muscles straining against the groaning metal. The alloy shrieked in protest, glowing a brilliant, melted amber.

Inch by inch, the hatch pried open.

Behind them, the final blast door came down with a definitive, thundering crash, sealing the shaft in a tomb of iron. At the exact same moment, the hatch gave way entirely. The four of them tumbled through the gap, falling through the red-lit dark, and spilled unceremoniously onto a polished floor.

They had entered the Vault of Cirrus.

It was not a mere room. It was a cathedral of absolute silence, vast and domed, carved from a single block of midnight-blue obsidian. The walls stretched up into darkness, lined with towering shelves that held millennia of pre-imperial relics, glowing starlight crystals, dormant cold-fusion engines, and ancient books bound in a strange, iridescent leather that seemed to repel the dust.

Yet, none of that mattered. At the exact geometric center of the cathedral, resting upon a pedestal of flawless black glass, floated the Harrow Star.

It was smaller than Kaelen had imagined from the campfire legends. It was a perfect sphere of liquid silver, roughly the size of a child's fist, suspended three feet in midair by its own immense, localized magnetism. It pulsed with a slow, deliberate light, rippling gently beneath its surface like a sleeping heart.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Marrow whispered, stepping forward with an expression of pure, religious awe.

"Don't touch it yet," Vesper snapped, her voice cutting through his trance as she advanced cautiously. "Look at the floor patterns. The pedestal is pressure-sensitive. Remove the weight incorrectly, and the whole chamber decompresses into the atmosphere."

Kaelen quickly scanned the perimeter of the vast room. "We have four exits, all currently sealed, but that alarm will have alerted the entire garrison. They'll be cutting through those doors in minutes. How do we move it without triggering the decompression?"

"We don't move it," Marrow said, his eyes still locked on the silver sphere. "The legends of the first dynasty

are true. The Harrow Star moves itself. It is entirely non-inertial; it's attracted to the unique aetheric signature of a living mind. One of us has to carry it out of here."

"Carry it?" Six squeaked, nursing his singed fingers. "Look at the energy displacement around the corona! It'll burn straight through human skin and bone."

"Then we wear more skin," Vesper said coolly.

With a deliberate, unhurried movement, she reached down and stripped off her long, black silk glove.

Kaelen gasped softly. Vesper's left hand was not made of flesh. It was a breathtaking, horrifying construct of braided silver wire, clockwork gears, and polished, pale bone—a specialized prosthetic built specifically around the unique molecular composition of the Harrow Star's own material. Faint, blue bio-luminescent light pulsed along her synthetic tendons.

"I've been preparing for this day for twenty long years," Vesper said, her voice dropping to a fierce, quiet whisper. "The Empire took my hand when they burned my home province. I spent two decades rebuilding it for one purpose: to steal their god."

She stepped up to the black glass pedestal and extended her silver hand.

For a terrifying second, nothing happened. Then, responding to the proximity of her cybernetic signature, the Harrow Star detached from its magnetic mooring. It drifted through the air, pulled toward her open palm like a moth to a flame.

When it touched her fingers, a blinding flash of white light illuminated the entire cathedral. Flesh, metal, and ancient energy fused in a brilliant cascade of sparks. Vesper flinched, her teeth bared in silent agony, but she did not pull away. Slowly, the liquid silver settled into the cradle of her silver hand, fitting perfectly like a rare pearl into its shell.

The ambient crimson alarm outside suddenly changed pitch, shifting into a long, continuous, wailing note that echoed off the obsidian walls.

"They know," Kaelen said, drawing her sidearm as the heavy outer doors began to groan under the force of an external plasma torch. "They know it's gone."

Vesper turned back to her crew, her face half-lit by the ethereal, pulsing glow of the star in her hand, a fierce smile touching her lips.

"Then we run."

6. The descent

They ran.

The Vault's exits had transformed into ravenous maws of flashing crimson light and deafening, rhythmic sirens that shook the very dust from the masonry. Vesper led the frantic retreat, her boots slamming against the cold iron of a service tunnel she had painstakingly memorized from Marrow's stolen blueprints. It was a narrow maintenance artery, slick with condensation, sloping sharply downward away from the opulent horrors of the throne room and toward the Seat's grim, industrial underbelly. In her right hand, the Harrow Star pulsed like a trapped heart, its jagged, crystalline edges throwing frantic, violet shadows against the corrugated walls.

Behind them, the rhythmic, terrifying thunder of boots echoed through the metal corridor. Dozens of them. Imperial Guards, the Emperor's own household elites, their heavy armour clanking in unison, the pneumatic systems of their steam-rifles hissing like angered vipers as they charged in relentless pursuit.

"Left! Down the auxiliary conduit!" Marrow wheezed, his voice cracking with age and sheer terror.

Vesper veered hard, her shoulder scraping the rusted bulkhead as she threw herself into a cross-tunnel. Kaelen lunged after her, reaching back to grab the collar of Six's oversized tunic and hauling the boy off his feet. The youth was deathly pale, his face slick with sweat, the two extra fingers on his left hand twitching in a frantic, subconscious rhythm against his thigh.

A sudden, deafening burst of steam-fire chewed into the iron wall a mere inch from Kaelen's head, showering them in white-hot sparks and blistering vapour. She tasted hot copper and ozone on the back of her tongue, her heart hammering against her ribs.

"They're not aiming for center mass," Kaelen panted, ducking her head as another hiss of scalding pressure vented above them. "They're herding us. Forcing us down."

Vesper's face remained grimly set, her jaw clenched so tight the muscles jumped. "They want the Star intact. If a single stray slug cracks the matrix, half the citadel goes up in an aetheric bloom. That gives us leverage, but it won't last forever. Once they corner us, they'll use the gas."

They burst suddenly out of the claustrophobic tunnel and into a cavernous, echoing chamber, a massive sorting depot for the Seat's vast waste systems. The air here was thick, smelling of sulphur, scorched grease, and old ash. Rusted conveyor belts loaded with mountain-sized heaps of gray slag and broken, discarded machinery stretched out like mechanical serpents into the gloom. Above them, a dizzying, chaotic lattice of iron catwalks and iron support beams crisscrossed the vaulted ceiling. Below, dropping into a terrifying abyss a hundred feet down, yawned the churning, rust-brown mouth of a massive industrial sludge processor, its giant steel teeth grinding together with a low, bone-rattling groan.

"Dead end," Six whispered, his wide eyes reflecting the murky depths below. "There are no other exits. We're trapped."

Kaelen squinted through the rising steam, her eyes darting from the high, shadowed catwalks down to the

swirling vortex of the processor. A reckless, desperate idea took root. "There's an exit. We just have to make it."

She lunged forward, grabbing a heavy, swinging conveyor chain that dangled from the ceiling, its links caked in grease. With a grunt of exertion, she swung her entire body weight toward the nearest overhead catwalk, kicking out hard at a glowing, brass control panel mounted on the stanchion as she passed.

The mechanism shrieked in protest. The primary conveyor belt lurched violently into motion with a groan of tortured metal, its massive gears grinding as it began to carry a mountain of debris upward at a steep angle.

"Get on!" Kaelen yelled, dropping onto the moving belt.

The heavy vault doors at the far end of the depot blew outward with a shower of sparks. The Imperial Guards poured into the chamber like a wave of dark iron, immediately raising their long-barrelled steam-rifles, aiming directly at the moving machinery.

"Vesper, do something!" Marrow scrambled onto the shifting slag, his boots slipping on the loose ash.

Vesper stood tall at the apex of the rising belt and held up the Harrow Star. "Stop!" she commanded, though whether she spoke to the guards or the artefact, she didn't know.

Light, blinding and violently purple, erupted from the core of the crystal. It wasn't a beam or a conventional weapon, but a sudden, localized pulse of pure, suffocating aetheric pressure. The atmospheric weight in the room skyrocketed in a millisecond. The copper pressure tanks on the Guards' rifles swelled, glowed dull red and exploded simultaneously in their hands. Men screamed, thrown backward by the concussive force of their own ruptured weapons, scabbing the floor with boiling water and shattered brass.

Kaelen stared, her mouth slightly open as the belt carried them higher into the shadows, away from the screaming wreckage below. "I didn't know the damn thing could do that."

"Neither did I," Vesper admitted, her hand trembling slightly as the Star's glow subsided to a faint, rhythmic throb. "Let's not count on a second miracle."

They scrambled off the moving belt and onto the high catwalks, sprinting through a dizzying maze of hissed steam pipes, groaning pressure valves, and mas-

sive, churning gears that threatened to crush them at every turn. The underbelly of the Seat was a living, breathing engine—stiflingly hot, endlessly hungry, and indifferent to their survival. At every junction, the echoing klaxons betrayed the movements of their pursuers. Every turn Vesper took seemed to lead them deeper into the maze, every corner presenting another iron grate or a locked security bulkhead.

Finally, Marrow stumbled, his breath coming in ragged, rattling gasps as he brought them to a halt at a grated viewport. "It's no use," he wheezed, clutching his chest. "The Mortal Scratch—the sky-docks where the skiffs are moored, it's three hundred feet directly above our heads. But the only internal route between here and there is the Garrison Yard. It's an open parade ground, Vesper. Five hundred Guards, minimum, stationed there at all times. We'd be cut to ribbons before we took ten paces."

Vesper stepped past him, leaning her forehead against the thick, reinforced glass of the viewport. Outside, the sky was a deep, bruised twilight, torn by the high-altitude winds of the upper atmosphere. She looked up, tracking the massive, vertical curve of the citadel's outer superstructure.

"Then we don't cross it," Vesper said softly. She turned to Kaelen, a fierce, mad spark in her eyes. "We go up the outside."

Kaelen followed her gaze through the glass, her stomach dropping into her boots. Bolted directly to the black iron hull of the Seat was a skeletal maintenance ladder, stretching up into the sheer, terrifying void of the open sky. Beyond it lay a thousand feet of vertical climb, entirely exposed to the biting gales, potential enemy sharpshooters, and the freezing, unshielded aether of the upper atmosphere.

"You're absolutely insane," Kaelen said, a hollow laugh escaping her lips. "The wind alone will rip us off the rungs."

"Yes," Vesper said, already unlatching the heavy pressure seal of the emergency hatch. "But I'm also right. It's the only way they won't expect."

The hatch swung open with a deafening howl as the pressurized air of the citadel rushed out to meet the mountain wind. Vesper didn't hesitate. She slung the pulsing Star into her satchel, stepped out onto the narrow ledge, and began to climb.

Kaelen swallowed the lump of terror in her throat, spared one last look at the dark depths of the factory floor behind them, and followed her out into the cold. Six came next, his extra fingers gripping the iron rungs with surprising, terrified strength, while Marrow brought up the rear, his old, weathered hands trembling violently as he forced his joints to move.

The wind hit them like a physical fist, freezing the sweat on their faces instantly and tearing the breath from their lungs. Below them, a dizzying drop of thousands of feet gave way to the jagged peaks of the mountain range below, shrouded in mist.

Suddenly, a blinding beam of light cut through the dark. A searchlight from the lower battlements swept across the hull, pinning them against the black iron like insects on a board.

Ping!

A lead bullet struck the ladder a mere two inches from Kaelen's face, spraying her cheek with sharp iron shavings. Another shot followed, whining past her ear into the empty sky.

"Don't look down!" Kaelen screamed over the roar-

ing gale, her knuckles turning white as she hauled herself up to the next rung. "Just keep climbing!"

High above, the edge of the sky-docks loomed, a agonizingly distant sanctuary in the freezing dark.

7. The garrison yard

They reached a maintenance alcove two hundred feet up, a shallow, rusted indentation in the Seat's external armour, just big enough for the four of them to press themselves flat against the riveted metal plates.

Kaelen's forearms burned like wildfire from the gruelling ascent. Her ears rang with the relentless, buffet-like howling of the upper-atmosphere wind, which threatened to rip them from the hull and toss them into the abyss below. Beside her, Vesper pressed the

Star tightly against her ribs, her hands white-knuckled. The artifact's ethereal, pulsing light was barely muffled by the thick wool of her heavy winter coat, leaking through the fabric in rhythmic, ghostly throbs of cerulean blue.

"The *Mortal Scratch* should be directly above us," Marrow muttered. He squinted through a cracked lens at his wrist-compass, tapping the brass housing to dislodge a speck of soot. "According to the atmospheric pressure readings, she's hovering right in the blind spot. But Rennick won't be able to drop a line without drawing every scrap of anti-air fire from the lower tiers."

Six edged closer to the precipice, his mechanical eye whirring softly as it zoomed in on the sprawling view below. "We've got company. A lot of it."

The Garrison Yard stretched out beneath them like a vast, paved apron of bleak granite, carved directly into the colossal flank of the floating fortress. It was a hive of chaotic, militaristic activity. Patrol skiffs with low-slung prows were being cranked into launch cradles; heavy munitions carts groaned under the weight of explosive payloads; and rank upon rank of Imperial Guardsmen, clad in their suffocating charcoal-grey

greatcoats, were forming up into neat, disciplined squares.

"They're prepping a grid search," Six reported, his voice devoid of emotion despite the stakes. "They're going to sweep the hull, section by section. At their current pace, it'll take them roughly an hour to reach this alcove."

"We don't have an hour," Kaelen said, her voice clipped. "We don't even have ten minutes. The moment those skiffs launch, Rennick will have to tuck tail and run, or the *Mortal Scratch* gets turned into kindling."

She leaned out slightly, ignoring the vertigo that clawed at her stomach, and surveyed the landscape. Her gaze locked onto the central command tower, which bristled with rotating signal lamps and glass-housed spotlights that sliced through the gathering gloom. Then, her eyes shifted to a neat line of heavy, bulbous fuel tenders parked along the eastern retaining wall, directly adjacent to the tower's primary power conduits. Finally, she looked up into the churning grey clouds, where the distinct, jagged silhouette of the *Mortal Scratch* hovered like a patient predator, just above the Seat's upper battery ring.

An insane, brilliant spark of an idea flared to life in her mind.

"Vesper," she said, turning her head. "How much precise control do you actually have over the Star right now?"

Vesper frowned, her brow furrowing as she shifted her grip on the warm, vibrating artefact. "Direct control? Minimal. But I can coax it. I can force a localized pulse if I compress the kinetic dampeners. Maybe focus the resultant pressure wave in a single direction. Why? What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'm going to give Rennick the grandest distraction this miserable empire has ever seen."

Quickly, in hushed, urgent tones that were nearly swallowed by the whistling wind, Kaelen laid out the plan. Marrow's jaw dropped, and Six's mechanical eye whined as it recalibrated in disbelief. Vesper listened in silence, her initial expression of deep scepticism slowly melting into something bordering on horrified admiration.

"You'll die, Kaelen," Vesper said softly, the wind whipping strands of dark hair across her face. "The blast radius alone will tear you off the rigging."

"Probably," Kaelen replied, a grim, humourless smile touching her lips. She unholstered her sidearm and checked the cylinder with a sharp click. "But I'm angry enough to be steady today. Remember?"

She didn't wait for them to argue or offer a safer alternative. Before Marrow could grab her shoulder, Kaelen swung herself out of the relative safety of the maintenance alcove. Grating her boots against the rivets, she slid down a corroded vertical drainpipe, dropping ten feet onto the corrugated iron roof of the yard's secondary tier.

Directly below her, an Imperial Guard patrol passed by, the rhythmic thud of their iron-shod boots vibrating through the metal structure. They were within ten feet of her position, their bayonets gleaming in the harsh light of the searchlights. Kaelen pressed herself flat against the cold iron, holding her breath until the air in her lungs turned to ice. The guards continued their march, oblivious to the saboteur crouching right above their helmets.

Once they rounded the corner, she dropped soundlessly from the roof, landing squarely on top of the nearest fuel tender. The massive vehicle was hot, vibrating with internal pressure, and stinking heavily of highly refined, volatile lift-gas.

Kaelen knelt, her hunting knife sliding from its sheath with a whisper of steel. With all the strength in her aching arms, she drove the blade deep into the tender's primary pressure hose. The thick rubber split open. A violent torrent of pressurized gas hissed into the frigid night air, invisible, but violently pungent, smelling of sulphur and ozone.

She scrambled backward off the vehicle, pulled a magnesium flare from her tactical belt, and struck the cap against her boot. It erupted into a blinding, sputtering white glare.

"Compliments of the undercity," she whispered, and tossed the burning brand directly into the escaping vapour.

The ensuing explosion was not a mere bang; it was a physical fist of roaring, brilliant orange fire that punched the sky. The sheer concussive force slammed Kaelen backward onto the cobblestones, knocking the wind from her lungs. The initial blast bloomed upward in a devastating mushroom cloud, instantly cooking off the two adjacent tenders. Within seconds, a parked patrol skiff caught fire, its ammunition stores detonating in a rapid-fire chain reaction.

The Garrison Yard transformed into an absolute inferno. Imperial Guardsmen scattered in utter chaos, their discipline evaporating as they screamed and fled the spreading sea of liquid fire. The command tower's vital signal lamps shattered from the shockwave, plunging the upper levels into sudden, smoky darkness.

Above the chaos, the clouds parted. The *Mortal Scratch* descended like a ghost through the roiling black smoke, her armored boarding ramp already extended. Captain Rennick stood at the wooden rail, his coat tails flying, laughing maniacally over the roar of the flames.

"You absolute madwoman!" Rennick shouted down, his voice booming through a brass megaphone. "You set fire to an entire Imperial garrison with a pocket flare?"

"Drop the bloody line, Rennick!" Kaelen screamed back, coughing violently as the acrid smoke filled her throat.

A heavy rope ladder unfurled from the airship's belly, tumbling down through the haze. High above, Vesper, Six, and Marrow scrambled out of their alcove, sliding down the hull with reckless abandon to catch the swinging rungs.

Kaelen stood her ground at the edge of the burning yard, her pistol raised. A handful of recovered Imperial Guardsmen were regrouping through the smoke, raising their long-rifles. She fired three shots in rapid succession, forcing them to dive for cover behind a burning chassis.

"Go! Go!" she roared to the others.

Turning to run for the ladder, a sudden, blinding spike of agony flared in her right leg. A bullet had grazed her thigh, tearing through flesh and trousers alike. She stumbled, her knee buckling, but pure adrenaline drove her forward. Another round tore cleanly through her coat sleeve, missing her forearm by mere millimeters.

With a desperate, lunging leap, she threw herself off the edge of the stone apron and grabbed the rope ladder with both hands. The *Mortal Scratch*'s engines roared, instantly pitching upward into a steep, aggressive climb. Kaelen clung to the swinging rungs, climbing one-handed through sheer force of will as the Garrison Yard shrank below her, a swirling, apocalyptic lake of fire fading into the dark.

Hands grabbed her jacket. She was hauled over the threshold, collapsing heavily onto the airship's scarred

wooden deck. Oren's heavy brass lungs whistled and hissed with rhythmic, mechanical wheezes as the burly engineer dragged her away from the open bay door. Dr. Hesh was already kneeling beside her, his face grim as he reached into his leather satchel for his silver suture kit.

"We have the Star," Vesper said, stepping forward into the light of the companionway. She was trembling from head to toe, her knuckles still white around the pulsating artefact, but her eyes shone with fierce triumph. "We actually have it."

But the celebration was short-lived. Six stood at the stern rail, his optical lens clicking rapidly as he stared out into the distance.

Kaelen pushed herself up on her elbows, wincing as Hesh applied an antiseptic swab to her leg. She followed Six's gaze out toward the eastern horizon.

Through the parting storm clouds, a new shape was rising from the deep valleys below. It was a dreadnought, colossal and black as a fresh bruise, cutting through the sky without a single whisper of engine noise, blotting out the stars.

The Silence had found them.

8. The Silence

The *Silence* was not a normal ship. It possessed no comforting engine hum, no rhythmic rustle of canvas sails, no familiar creaking of weathered hull joints. Instead, it glided through the luminescent currents of the aether like a stray thought, silent, inevitable and bone-chillingly cold.

Kaelen had heard the tavern whispers across a dozen sky-ports: tales of the Imperator's secret weapon, a phantom vessel engineered solely to hunt down rogue navigators and pirate kings. She had never believed the stories were true.

She believed them now.

"Aetheric signature is absolute null," Marrow said, his knuckles white against the brass dials of his console. His voice, usually a calm baritone, was tightly wound. "It's not reflecting any known frequency, Kaelen. Our instruments are completely blind to it. Only our eyes can see the damn thing."

Rennick cursed, slamming a heavy fist against the wooden railing of the bridge. "Then how in the hell do we shoot it?"

"We don't," Vesper said, her icy command cutting through the rising panic. "We run."

She didn't wait for acknowledgment. "All hands, brace! Heel hard to starboard!"

The *Mortal Scratch* groaned in protest as she veered sharply, diving headlong toward a churning bank of incandescent clouds. Yet, the *Silence* followed. It did not lose an inch, matching their trajectory with terrifying, silent precision. As it drew closer, the eerie light of the aether caught its monolithic hull. It was studded with massive bronze harpoon launchers, weapons designed not for mere boarding actions, but for shredding a ship's gas envelope and plunging its crew into the abyss.

Kaelen threw herself into the pilot's chair. As she gripped the steering column, a white-hot agony flared in her thigh where an Inquisitor's bullet had torn through the flesh hours earlier. She hissed, biting her lip until she tasted copper, and forced the pain into a dark corner of her mind.

"Marrow!" she shouted over the wind. "Give me a current. Anything with enough turbulence to break their stride!"

Marrow squinted through his brass sextant. "Thermal vent, three degrees west! But Kaelen, it's incredibly narrow. We'll be threading a needle."

"Narrow is good," Kaelen muttered, dragging the wheel violently to the left. "Narrow is our only chance."

The *Mortal Scratch* plunged into the thermal vent, and the world dissolved into chaos. The ship bucked like a wild stallion. Searing, violent updrafts surged from the deep aether below, lifting the frigate, twisting her frame and making the rigging scream. Behind them, the massive silhouette of the *Silence* entered the roiling vent.

For the first time since the chase began, the dreadnought made a sound. It was a low, agonizing groan

of tortured metal. The phantom ship was simply too massive, its rigid hull unable to flex against the violent, twisting currents of the thermal vent.

"It's slowing down!" Six yelled from the spotting crow's nest, his mechanical eye spinning furiously as he tracked the enemy. "But it's not stopping, Captain! It's pushing through!"

Vesper strode purposefully to the aft rail, her boots clicking rhythmically against the deck. In her right hand, she held the Star high above her head. The ancient artefact pulsed with a brilliant, blinding light, acting as a beacon to the crew, but now, a weapon of desperation. Channelling her willpower, Vesper focused the volatile aetheric pressure surrounding them into a singular, blinding lance of pure energy.

With a cry of effort, she fired.

The searing beam tore through the fog, striking the *Silence* squarely on its formidable bow. Thick armour plating cracked and peeled away like parchment, and the great dreadnought listed heavily to port. Yet, even as it tilted, the mechanical beasts on its deck fired.

Three massive bronze harpoons erupted from the smoke, trailing heavy iron cables that crackled and glowed with a vicious blue electric charge.

The first harpoon punched clean through the *Mortal Scratch's* aft deck, showering the crew with splinters. The second grazed the upper envelope, tearing canvas but missing the vital gas cells.

The third struck Oren.

The gentle mechanical engineer had been standing by the primary engine housing, desperately checking a vibrating pressure valve. The massive harpoon tore through her left shoulder, pinning her fragile frame instantly to the wooden deck. She didn't scream. Instead, her artificial brass lungs emitted a high, thin, whistling note of pure agony.

"Oren!" Dr. Hesh cried out, sprinting from the companionway with his medical kit. But as he reached for her, the harpoon cable flared with live energy. A lethal arc of electricity snapped through the air, throwing the doctor backward across the deck, his coat smoking.

Kaelen glanced over her shoulder from the helm. The *Silence* was winding its winches. The cables were taut, dragging the crippled frigate backward. In less than two minutes, they would be close enough for the Imperator's boarding parties.

"Cut the cable!" Kaelen roared.

"It's heavily charged with aetheric current!" Marrow shouted back, desperation bleeding into his voice. "If we sever it blindly, the electrical feedback will travel straight down the line and blow the port engine sky-high!"

Kaelen's eyes locked onto Oren's pale face. "Then we blow the engine."

She didn't wait for a committee vote. Leaving the wheel to lock in place, Kaelen drew her heavy boarding knife. She ripped a thick strip of rubber insulation from a nearby loose conduit, wrapped it securely around her gloved hand, and vaulted over the console. With a fierce, defiant yell, she brought the blade down hard on the pulsing cable.

The resulting explosion was utterly blinding.

The *Mortal Scratch's* port engine died instantly in a violent shower of sparks and black smoke. The ship lurched violently to the side, nearly throwing Kaelen over the railing. But the glowing cable snapped, going dark and whipping uselessly back into the fog. The *Silence's* harpoon retracted into the gloom, leaving Oren bleeding profusely on the scorched deck.

"We've lost all primary thrust," Rennick reported, his voice hollow as he gripped the useless secondary throttles. "We're drifting in the soup."

Through the smoke, the *Silence* kept coming. It was closer now, so close that Kaelen could clearly discern the terrifying figures lining its upper decks. They were Inquisitors clad in polished bronze masks, their steam-lances glinting menacingly in the ambient light of the aether.

Vesper dropped to her knees beside Oren. The engineer's organic eye was wide and glassy, fixed on the sky. The clockwork mechanisms within her chest whirred erratically, her brass lungs whistling slower, softer, and more sporadically.

"Don't you dare leave us, Oren," Vesper whispered, her regal composure fracturing as tears welled in her eyes. "Stay with me."

Oren trembled. With a monumental effort, she raised her remaining good hand, her oil-stained fingers gently touching Vesper's cheek. She tried to smile, but the clockwork gears inside her chest gave one final, tragic shudder. Her hand fell limp against the deck.

The whistling stopped completely.

Kaelen stood a few feet away, watching the light fade from her friend's eye. She felt something profound crack deep inside her chest. It wasn't grief, not yet. It was something far colder, sharper, and altogether more dangerous. It was absolute rage.

She turned back to the helm, her grip tightening on her knife until her knuckles turned white.

"Rennick," Kaelen said, her voice dropping to a deadly, quiet calm that chilled the remaining crew to the bone. "Get down to the hold and reroute the remaining power to the emergency thrusters. We're going to ram them."

Rennick let out a bitter, disbelieving laugh, staring at her as if she had lost her mind. "Ram the *Silence*? Kaelen, look at us. We're a battered, broken frigate. They're a bloody imperial dreadnought."

Kaelen stepped back up to the pilot's chair, her eyes locked onto the approaching bronze masks of their executioners.

"Then we'll make a damn dent."

9. The dent

The *Mortal Scratch* had absolutely no business surviving a ramming action. Kaelen knew this with the bitter certainty of a seasoned void-captain. Rennick knew it too, though he merely spat a glob of dark tobacco onto the iron grating and checked the seating of his throwing blades. Even Marrow, a man who worshiped a universe of rigid mathematical order and flawless engineering, crossed himself with a trembling hand before strapping his spindly frame into a crash harness.

But Vesper held the Harrow Star, and that changed the arithmetic entirely.

"If I pulse the Star's full spectrum at the precise moment of impact," Vesper said, her voice strained as she adjusted the brass dials on the containment apparatus, "it might disrupt the Silence's aetheric armour. Key word being *might*. We will have approximately three seconds of soft hull before the resonance rebounds, shatters the containment core, and kills us all."

"Three seconds," Kaelen repeated, her fingers tightening around the cold iron of the steering column. Her knuckles were stark white. "In a fight like this, love, three seconds is a bloody lifetime. Let's do it."

Vesper nodded, her pale face illuminated by the volatile, swirling violet light trapped within the Star. With a sharp twist of a lever, she fed what remained of the sputtering starboard engine directly into the auxiliary thrusters.

The *Mortal Scratch* groaned, her timber-and-iron frame shuddering violently, and then she shot forward through the cloudbank like a spear thrown by an angry god.

Emerging from the mist, the *Silence* loomed. It was a monstrous dreadnought of black iron and jagged bone-work. Kaelen could see its massive bronze ramming prow gleaming maliciously in the pale twilight,

and atop its high railings stood the mask-faced Inquisitors, motionless, horrific, radiating a silent, patient hunger that threatened to swallow the crew's sanity before the ships even touched.

"Vesper, now!" Kaelen roared over the deafening shriek of the overtaxed engines.

Vesper raised the Harrow Star high above her head. Light poured from the artefact, not in a controlled pulse as she had predicted, but in a continuous, deafening scream of raw aetheric energy. The beam struck the approaching dreadnought, and the *Silence's* formidable hull began to shimmer. Its impenetrable nullfield flickered violently, peeled back like burnt parchment, and exposed the vulnerable metal beneath.

"Brace! Brace for impact!" Rennick bellowed, his voice cutting through the din.

Kaelen slammed the primary throttle wide open, committing them to the abyss.

The *Mortal Scratch* struck the *Silence* just below its grand command bridge with a cataclysmic, metal-rending crunch. The violent deceleration threw everyone brutally against their canvas harnesses. Iron plating buckled, rivets popped like pistol shots, and super-

heated steam exploded from severed pipes in blinding white plumes. The *Silence* groaned, a deep, agonizing sound like a dying leviathan and listed heavily to port, its proud spine snapped by the desperate manoeuvre.

But the *Mortal Scratch* was dying too.

The proud bow was utterly crumpled, reduced to a jagged mass of tangled wreckage. The great silk envelope overhead hissed ominously, rapidly leaking its precious lift-gas into the cold upper atmosphere. With a final, wet cough, the second engine sputtered, threw a shower of oily sparks, and died completely. A heavy, suffocating silence fell over the deck, broken only by the hiss of escaping steam.

"Boarding parties!" Rennick yelled, effortlessly slicing through his harness with a single fluid motion. "We've got company!"

Masked Inquisitors, draped in tattered black vestments and wielding wicked, steam-hissing lances, were already swarming onto the *Mortal Scratch's* shattered foredeck through the smoking breach.

Kaelen unbuckled herself, her muscles aching from the impact. She drew her service pistol, pulled the trigger, and heard only a dry, hollow click. Empty. With

a curse, she tossed the useless firearm aside and drew her heavy trench knife.

"Vesper!" Kaelen barked, turning to the young woman who was cradling the vibrating Star. "Get the Star to the *Tin Queen*. You have to move, now!"

"What?" Vesper gasped, coughing through the thick smoke. "No, Kaelen, I'm not leaving you behind!"

"Darrow's still out there in the mist," Kaelen insisted, grabbing Vesper by the shoulder and shoving her toward the companionway. "He'll find you. He always does. Now go, damn it!"

Vesper hesitated for one agonizing heartbeat, looking at the chaos unfolding on the deck. Then, biting her lip, she turned and ran, sprinting through the shattered mess hall, down the buckled corridor, toward the aft emergency hatch where the tiny skiff, the *Tin Queen*, was still moored to the auxiliary cradle. Six followed her, axe drawn, providing a rearguard, while Marrow scrambled close behind, clutching his ledger of calculations like a shield.

Rennick stepped up beside Kaelen, his scarred face twisting into a grim, fearless smile as he drew a pair of long throwing blades from his bandolier. "You know we're not getting out of this one alive, Captain."

"I am entirely aware of the tactical disadvantage, Rennick," Kaelen muttered, shifting her weight onto her good leg.

"Good," he said, the brass hilts of his weapons catching the firelight. "Then let's make the bastards pay an exorbitant price for the privilege."

They fought back-to-back across the slippery, blood-slicked deck. Kaelen's knife found a gap in an Inquisitor's armour, plunging into his throat with a wet thud. Rennick's blades flew in a blurred rhythm of lethal precision, two, three, four attackers dropped into the encroaching fog, chests pierced. But more came. There were always more emerging from the dark bowels of the dreadnought.

Suddenly, a hiss of pressurized air cut through the shouting. A steam-lance caught Rennick squarely in the chest. The force of the blow drove him backward, and he fell to the deck without a single sound, the light instantly vanishing from his eyes.

"Rennick!" Kaelen screamed, a primal rage overtaking her grief.

She lunged forward, grabbed the hot metal barrel of the steam-lance from the stunned Inquisitor's

hands, and swung it like a cricket bat. The heavy brass buttstock shattered the attacker's porcelain mask. She swung again and again, piling bodies around her in a desperate perimeter. Her vision blurred with sweat and tears; her left thigh was bleeding profusely through a makeshift bandage, staining her trousers a deep crimson. She was fading, and she knew it.

Then, a familiar, high-pitched mechanical whistle pierced the air, not the wheezing lungs of the dying ship, but the unmistakable, over-tuned whine of the *Tin Queen's* rotary engine.

Darrow had dropped like a stone through the upper cloud layer, the nimble little skiff weaving recklessly between the *Silence's* sweeping harpoon lines and falling rigging. Vesper was strapped into the passenger seat, the glowing Harrow Star clutched tightly to her chest like a newborn child.

"Kaelen!" Darrow roared over the roar of the wind, swinging the skiff's boarding net dangerously close to the crumbling stern rail. "Jump, you stubborn fool! Jump!"

Kaelen looked back one last time. She looked at Rennick's unmoving body, at the burning timber of her deck, and at the dozen faceless Inquisitors closing in on her position with raised weapons.

Turning her back on the enemy, she ran to the shattered rail and threw herself into the open air.

She caught the *Tin Queen's* hemp boarding net with her one good hand, her fingers cramping around the rough rope. She swung once, like a pendulum over the dizzying drop of the cloud sea, before losing her grip and crashing heavily onto the iron deck of the cargo bay.

Darrow pulled the altitude lever up hard. The little skiff roared, its engines screaming in protest as it clawed its way back up into the safety of the storm clouds. Below them, the massive silhouette of the *Silence* receded, its formidable hull visibly cracked and smoking, but horribly, undeniably still floating.

Kaelen lay flat on her back on the cold deck plating, gasping for breath, her chest heaving as the adrenaline began to drain away, leaving only agonizing pain. Vesper unbuckled herself and knelt beside her, the Harrow Star pulsing with a dim, rhythmic violet glow between them.

"We lost them," Vesper whispered, her voice breaking as she looked out at the empty sky. "We lost everyone, Kaelen."

Kaelen closed her eyes against the burning tears, the image of Rennick's scarred smile etched into her mind. "Not everyone," she whispered into the dark.

But as the *Tin Queen* fled deeper into the cold, uncaring sky, she knew it was a lie.

10. The weight of survival

The *Tin Queen* limped through three days of thick, sulphurous cloud cover before Darrow finally found a safe harbour: a derelict imperial way station anchored to a jagged chunk of floating granite, abandoned by the Empire a decade ago.

Kaelen spent most of those days unconscious, gripped by a fever that made her thrash against the grease-stained cot. The wound in her thigh, the parting gift of an imperial bayonet, pulled and wept dark fluid through its rough bandages. Dr Hesh had stayed behind on the *Mortal Scratch*. He'd been down in the medical bay when the boarding parties breached the lower decks, and through the smoke and the screaming, no one had seen him come out.

Vesper sat watch by Kaelen's side. She barely slept, her silver-grey eyes fixed on the shadows dancing across the bulkheads. The Harrow Star never left her hand. It sat in her palm like a heavy, polished cobblestone, its surface shifting with a faint, oily luminescence that cast long, unnatural patterns across her gaunt features.

On the third morning, Kaelen woke to the harsh, acrid smell of burnt rubber coffee. The fever had broken, leaving her skin clammy and her limbs feeling as heavy as lead.

Darrow was at the tiller in the forward cockpit, his shoulders hunched, his face thinner and more hollowed out than Kaelen ever remembered. In the corner of the cramped berth, Six sat in silence, meticulously cleaning the gears of his heavy crossbow with a oil-soaked rag.

Marrow was missing. The realization hit Kaelen with the force of a physical blow. He'd taken a jagged shard of hull metal directly to the spine during the ramming action, and he had bled out in the *Tin Queen*'s cargo bay just two hours after they broke orbit.

"We're four," Kaelen said, forcing herself to sit up. Her voice was a dry rasp that scraped against her throat.

Six didn't look up from his work, but the rhythmic clicking of his rag stopped for a fraction of a second.

"Four," Vesper agreed from the darkness of the corner. She wasn't looking at Kaelen; her eyes were still pinned to the stone in her hands. "And a god."

Kaelen swung her legs over the edge of the cot, stifling a groan as her wounded thigh protested, and hobbled toward the rusted viewport. Outside, the way station's massive, corroded docking clamps held them fast against the rock. Beyond the platform, the endless sky was a bruised, swirling purple. The great gaseous updrafts of the lower atmosphere were beginning to churn, storm season was coming early.

"The Empire's going to hunt us with everything they have," Kaelen muttered, pressing her forehead against the cool, vibrating glass. "They won't stop at the border sectors. Not after what we took."

"Let them hunt," Vesper said, her voice dropping an octave. She finally raised her head, holding the Harrow Star out between them. The stone's liquid-like surface rippled with a sudden flash of amethyst light. "I've spent the last forty-eight hours mapping the Star's frequencies. The Imperator's entire automated control grid operates on a single, centralized master harmonic.

If I can find the exact resonance, I can break it. Not just disrupt the signal, Kaelen. Break it entirely. Permanently."

Six paused, his fingers tightening around the stock of his crossbow. "What does 'permanently' mean for the rim worlds?"

"It means every weather cannon keeping the high storms at bay shuts down," Vesper said, her eyes flashing. "It means every imperial patrol route loses its steering arrays. And every slave chip embedded in every factory worker from here to the capital shorts out."

"And every prison cell?" Six whispered, his voice suddenly hollow. He was thinking of the iron dungeons deep below the Seat of Empires. They all were. His brother was still down there, assuming the damp hadn't taken him yet.

"Every single one," Vesper confirmed.

Kaelen turned away from the viewport, her gaze locking onto the artefact. "How long do you need?"

"Three days. Maybe four," Vesper admitted, a rare note of frustration clipping her words. "The Star shows me the base harmonics easily enough, but I

have to cross-reference the navigational vectors with Marrow's star charts. Without him here to translate the old high-altitude coordinates..." She trailed off, staring at the empty space where the navigator usually kept his instruments.

"Without him, we learn faster," Kaelen said firmly. She limped across the creaking deckplates and sat down directly across from Vesper, ignoring the sharp flare of pain in her leg. "Teach me."

Vesper's glacier-hard face softened, just for a moment. A faint, sad smile touched the corner of her mouth. "You want to learn how to read aetheric harmonics? It takes standard acolytes seven years at the academy just to look at the light without going blind."

"I don't have seven years, and neither do the people in those factories," Kaelen said, leaning forward. "I want to finish what we started, Vesper. Show me what to look for."

They worked through the night. The cabin was silent save for the low, rhythmic hum of the *Tin Queen*'s idling engines and the occasional crackle of static from the dashboard. And they worked through the next night, and the next.

While they studied, Darrow risked short trips into the abandoned corridors of the way station, foraging for old ration tins and canisters of stale, filtered water. Six worked in the shadows of the outer hull, rigging tripwires and proximity alarms along the perimeter catwalks to ensure they wouldn't be taken by surprise.

Kaelen and Vesper remained hunched over the Harrow Star. Together, they watched its shifting, mercurial surface ripple with strange, unsettling colours that didn't belong to the normal spectrum, shades of ultraviolet and deep infra-golds that made Kaelen's teeth ache just to look at them. Vesper guided her, pointing out the fragile mathematical logic hidden within the chaotic swirls of light.

On the fourth afternoon, as the first heavy droplets of an atmospheric storm began to lash against the viewports, Vesper suddenly froze.

"There," she breathed, her finger hovering a millimetre above a pulsing, incredibly thin thread of silver-green light that darted like a needle through the core of the stone. "The master frequency. It's buried deep within the Seat's own aetheric generator."

Kaelen leaned closer, the strange light reflecting in her dark pupils. "If it's in the main generator, that

means we can't broadcast the counter-signal from out here in the rim."

"No," Vesper said quietly, the weight of the realization settling over them like a shroud. "To overwrite the master frequency, the Star has to be physically linked to the primary core."

Kaelen's jaw tightened as the pieces fell into place. "The primary core is located directly beneath the throne room."

"Yes."

"Right under the Imperator's feet."

"Yes."

For a long minute, the only sound was the howling of the storm against the way station's rusted iron bones. Six stopped his packing, his eyes darting between the two women. Forward in the cockpit, Darrow slowly turned around in the pilot's chair, his face grim.

Kaelen stood up. Her thigh ached fiercely, a dull, throbbing reminder of how close they had already come to dying, but her leg held its ground. She reached down, picked up her coat from the back of the chair, and slung it over her shoulders.

"Then we go back," Kaelen said.

11. The second thief

Going back to the Imperial Seat was not a plan. It was a prayer with sharp edges.

Darrow plotted a course through the Ghost Currents, the same drifting graveyard where they'd hidden weeks before. This time, they didn't stop to scavenge or lick their wounds. The *Tin Queen* flew low and fast, her rusted hull hugging the fractured ribs of dead dreadnoughts to mask her aetheric signature. At the helm, Vesper fed power directly into the Star of Antiquity, using its volatile resonance to confuse the Imperial sensors painting the sector.

"They think we're three different ships heading in four directions," she reported over the comms. A thin, dangerous smile tugged at the corner of her mouth, illuminated by the violet pulse of the navigation console. "The Imperator's admirals are currently arguing with each other over which ghost to chase."

"Good," Kaelen said, leaning against the bulkheads, hands wrapped tight around his rifle. "Let them argue. The longer they stare at shadows, the less they're looking at the gate."

They reached the Seat's outer wall at midnight. The fortress was a jagged monolith of black stone and brass, jutting out into the void like a cracked tooth. Tonight, the garrison was on high alert. Great cones of blinding white searchlights swept the darkness, and patrol skiffs buzzed across the perimeter like angry wasps.

Yet, the Star's unnatural light showed Vesper a seam in the armour. It pointed to a blind spot: a maintenance lock near the Seat's eastern battery, left completely unguarded.

"The Empire runs on paperwork," Vesper murmured, tapping the diagnostic screen. "Always has. One lazy clerk, one typo on a duty roster, and a thou-

sand tons of impenetrable fortress becomes a wide-open back door."

Darrow guided the *Tin Queen* into the shadow of the battery with agonizing patience. They docked in an abandoned, cavernous munitions bay, the metallic *thunk* of the clamps echoing softly in the dark. Six immediately threw the dampener switches, muffling the engines until the ship hummed no louder than a sleeping bee.

Silently, they crept into the Seat's secondary corridors. Kaelen led the way, rifle raised, his eyes scanning the cold, vaulted architecture. Six followed, carrying a heavy satchel of breaching charges. Vesper came last, the Star hidden away in a lead-lined pouch at her belt, though she could still feel its rhythmic, warm thumping against her hip like a stolen heartbeat.

The throne room was four hundred feet above them. Between their boots and that floor lay three heavily fortified guard stations, two Inquisitor barracks, and a grand staircase lined with towering bronze statues of long-dead emperors.

"We can't go through," Six whispered, his voice muffled by his respirator as he pointed toward a heavily armored security gate. "So we go around."

He pried open a heavy iron grating, revealing a vertical ventilation shaft, a dark, claustrophobic tunnel barely wide enough for a grown person to squeeze through.

They climbed for an hour. It was a miserable, suffocating ascent. The shaft's walls were slick with hot grease and soot, and the air tasted of stale charcoal and ozone. For Kaelen, every foot gained was agony; the wound in his injured thigh burned and screamed with every brace and push. He ground his teeth together until his jaw ached, refusing to let out a sound. Vesper, climbing just below him, could hear his ragged breathing but knew better than to offer help he would only refuse. They kept moving. They had to.

Finally, Six reached a secondary vent cover, unlatched it with practiced silence, and slipped through. They emerged into the dim, heavy shadows behind a massive, dusty tapestry depicting the Siege of Valen.

Peeking through the gaps in the frayed threads, Vesper's breath caught. They weren't just in the upper levels. They were in the throne room's antechamber.

And the Imperator was there.

The ruler of the known worlds sat upon a towering throne of jagged black iron. His body was withered

and frail, looking entirely swallowed by the massive, polished bronze exoskeleton that encased him. The machine hissed and clicked with every laboured breath he took, hydraulic fluid pumping through transparent tubes to keep his ancient heart beating. His face was a horrifying mask of petrified rage, pale skin pulled so tight over bone that it looked like stretched parchment, and his eyes were like two drops of absolute ink, devoid of light.

Around the dais stood a dozen Inquisitors, motionless as statues in their crimson robes, their steam-lances already hummed with charged, lethal energy.

The air in the room was freezing, thick with the scent of incense and burning oil. The heavy silence was broken only by the rhythmic, mechanical sighing of the throne.

The Imperator's head tilted slightly, the gears in his neck clicking in a rapid, sickening sequence. He did not turn to look at the tapestry, yet his voice rang out, a dry, papery rustle that seemed to echo from the floorboards themselves.

"Captain Vesper," the Imperator said, his black eyes staring straight ahead at the empty room. "I wondered when you'd come back for the rest of your hand."

Vesper took a slow, steadying breath. She caught Kaelen's eye, gave him a sharp nod, and then stepped out boldly from behind the heavy tapestry, her boots clicking against the polished marble floor.

The Inquisitors shifted instantly, their steam-lances pivoting toward her in a synchronized, terrifying motion. Kaelen and Six remained hidden in the shadows, rifles aimed through the fabric, waiting for the signal.

"You always did have a terrible memory, Your Eminence," Vesper said, her voice steady, echoing off the high vaults of the ceiling. She let her hand rest casually near her belt, where the Star of Antiquity pulsed aggressively against her hip, its violet light bleeding faintly through the seams of the lead-lined pouch. "I didn't come back for my hand."

The Imperator's thin, blue lips curled into a hideous mimicry of a smile, the bronze pistons on his chest hissing loudly as he leaned forward. "No? Then you came to die in the dark, a thief caught in a trap of her own making."

"Not quite," Vesper replied, her eyes locked onto his ink-black stare. She unhitched the pouch from her belt. "I came for the rest of your empire."

12. The throne room

The vaulted ceilings of the High Seat loomed overhead, lost in an oppressive, manufactured gloom. Massive pillars of polished obsidian reflected the cold, uniform glow of the imperial control grid, a grid that thrummed like a distant, angry hornet's nest. At the far end of the chamber, atop a dais of jagged iron, sat the Imperator.

As the doors hissed shut behind them, a dozen Inquisitors snapped to attention. Their armour was the colour of dried blood, and their heavy lances crackled with volatile, weaponised aether. In unison, they raised their weapons, the tips pointing unerringly at Vesper's chest.

The Imperator raised a single, pale finger.

"Wait," he said, his voice amplified by the sub-dermal vox-grille in his throat. It echoed off the high walls, cold and scraped of all humanity. "Let her speak. I want to hear how she plans to die."

Vesper didn't flinch. She walked forward, her boots clicking rhythmically against the pristine marble floor. Every step was deliberate, carrying the weight of a lifetime spent running.

Behind her, Kaelen melted into the deep shadows cast by the pillars. Her hand rested naturally on the hilt of her vibro-knife, her eyes tracking the Inquisitors' movements with predatory focus. Six had already vanished into the maintenance ductwork by now, he'd be navigating the labyrinthine pipes to find the aetheric core's primary access panel, just as they'd meticulously planned on the journey here.

"Your control grid is a lie," Vesper said, her voice steady despite the sheer terror screaming through her veins. She stopped at the base of the dais, looking up at the tyrant. "You told your people it was for protection. For order. A shield against the chaos of the void. But it was always a cage. You track every ship, every

breath, every heartbeat. You turned an entire sector into a panopticon."

The Imperator leaned forward, the hydraulics of his massive mechanical exoskeleton hissing softly. "Order requires oversight, child. The unwashed masses demand a shepherd."

"And you built your crook on a frequency you didn't even invent," Vesper countered, her voice rising, filled with a righteous fury that had burned within her for a decade. "You stole it from the pre-imperial navigators. From my family."

The Imperator's eyes, milky and sunken within his porcelain skull, narrowed. "Your family were traitors to the new dawn. They clung to old superstitions."

"My family were free," Vesper hissed. "And you slaughtered them for it."

She held up her left hand. It was a beautiful, terrible thing of articulated silver and brass, a prosthetic replacement for what the Empire had stripped away. "You took this from me. You took everything. Now, I've taken your Star. And I'm going to take your grid."

With her flesh-and-blood hand, she reached into her leather pouch and pulled out the Star of the Navigators.

Instantly, light flooded the throne room. It wasn't the soft, ethereal pulse it had emitted in the deep tunnels of the outer rims; this was a blinding, cascading, burning white brilliance. The sheer purity of the energy tore through the artificial twilight of the chamber.

The Inquisitors staggered backward, shielding their visors. The energy hum from their lances flickered violently, sputtered, and died.

"What is this?" one of the guards shouted, his weapon clattering to the floor.

The Imperator screamed, a horrific, metallic screech. The overwhelming aetheric feedback from the Star slammed into his cybernetics. His massive exoskeleton seized, the servos whining in protest as the joints locked tight.

"Kill her!" he roared, his voice distorting into a robotic screech. "Kill her now!"

The Inquisitors, blinded but driven by absolute obedience, charged blindly forward.

"My turn," Kaelen muttered, stepping out of the shadows like a wraith.

Her knife caught the first Inquisitor cleanly in the throat before he could even register her presence. As he collapsed, she snatched the inert lance from his grip, spun on her heel, and drove the blunt end directly into the chest of a second guard, sending him flying across the polished floor.

A third Inquisitor managed to grapple her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. Kaelen grinned, threw her head back with savage force, and felt the satisfying crunch of his nose breaking. As his grip loosened, she spun, caught him by the collar, and kicked him squarely into the path of a fourth attacker.

"Hurry, Vesper!" Kaelen shouted over the din of clashing armour.

Behind the chaotic melee, Vesper dropped to her knees. She pressed the pulsing Star directly against the throne room's floor. The aetheric core was housed directly below this chamber—she could feel its thumping, mechanical heartbeat vibrating through the soles of her boots.

The Star began to resonate. It hummed a pure, ancient melody that perfectly matched the master frequency of the grid. For a second, the two energies coexisted. Then, the Star began to forcefully overwrite it.

"No... I will not allow this!"

Vesper looked up. The Imperator was forcing himself up from his throne. His exoskeleton moved him like a broken puppet, jerky, unnatural, sparks flying from his hydraulic shoulders as he fought the feedback loop. With a trembling, cybernetic hand, he drew a long, ceremonial blade from his belt. Its monomolecular edge gleamed with a cruel sharpness.

"You think breaking the grid ends this?" he hissed, spitting blood onto his iron dais as he dragged his heavy frame down the steps toward her. "I am the Empire. I am the foundations of this world. You cut the strings, but I'll still be here. I'll rebuild. I'll always rebuild!"

Vesper looked him dead in the eye, her silver hand gripping the Star with absolute finality.

"No," she said softly. "You won't."

She reached her hand directly into the blinding light of the Star and pulled.

With a deafening sound like tearing canvas, the master frequency ripped free of the core. A visible tear opened in the very air of the throne room, a jagged, bleeding wound of silver light that shattered the re-

maining imperial machinery. The Imperator's exoskeleton completely died, its hum vanishing instantly. The immense weight of the dead armour dragged him down. He fell heavily to his knees, and then collapsed flat onto his face, pinned by his own monument to tyranny.

The grid was dead.

Across the sprawling expanse of the empire, the effects were instantaneous. On the surface of distant, terraformed worlds, massive weather cannons fell silent, allowing the natural, chaotic winds to blow for the first time in a century. In the upper atmosphere, patrol skiffs lost power and drifted aimlessly, falling from the clear skies.

Deep within the smog-choked factory districts, the slave chips embedded in a million lungs flickered, rebooted, and permanently unlocked with a chorus of soft clicks. The labourers stopped. They dropped their heavy wrenches and looked up at the ceiling. They blinked away the grime, looked at one another, and began to walk outside, breathing untaxed air for the very first time in their lives.

Back in the ruined throne room, a heavy silence fell. The remaining Inquisitors lay unconscious or groaning on the floor. The Imperator did not move.

Kaelen walked over, wiping her blade on her trousers, and gently helped Vesper to her feet. Vesper was trembling, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The Star in her hand was much dimmer now—its ancient reservoirs spent, almost entirely exhausted.

"Six!" Kaelen called out into the echoing chamber. "Six, we need to go, now!"

A small service hatch near the dais popped open with a loud clang. Six emerged from the hole, his long, six-fingered hands stained to the knuckles with black grease and aether-fluid. He was panting, his wide eyes blinking rapidly.

"Core's fried," Six gasped, wiping his brow and leaving a dark smear across his forehead. "I pulled every safety dampener on the way out. The whole damn Seat is going to lose altitude and crash into the sea in about an hour."

Kaelen exchanged a grim look with Vesper, then glanced toward the shaking walls. "Then I suggest we take that hour and get the hell out of here."

Turning their backs on the fallen tyrant, they ran.

13. The fall

The Imperial Seat did not fall quietly. It fell like a dying god, groaning, shedding chunks of ancient masonry and shedding its thousand years of tyranny in a cascading avalanche of broken stone, ruptured copper pipes, and superheated steam.

Kaelen led the way through the labyrinthine corridors of the upper decks, his boots skidding on stone tiles that tilted and buckled underfoot. The artificial gravity generators were failing, pulsing erratically and making every step feel like a desperate scramble up a shifting mountain. Beside him, Vesper stumbled, her silver prosthetic arm throwing off a shower of erratic blue sparks as it scraped against the trembling bulkhead.

"Keep moving!" Kaelen shouted over the deafening roar of structural collapse. "The core is completely destabilised. If we are still inside when the containment field snaps, we won't even leave ashes!"

Behind them, Six scrambled over a pile of freshly fallen debris. The young scout's face was smeared with soot, his breathing ragged. "The grand staircase is gone!" he yelled, glancing back at the yawning abyss that had opened up in the heart of the palace. "The whole western wing is shearing off!"

As if on cue, a thunderous crack echoed through the corridor. The floor split open, a jagged fissure racing toward them like a hunting hound. Bronze statues of long-dead autocrats, once designed to inspire terror and absolute obedience, toppled from their high alcoves, shattering into heavy fragments upon the polished marble. Kaelen lunged forward, grabbing Six by the collar of his leather jacket and hauling him across the widening gap just as a massive bust of the first Imperator crashed through the floorboards, plummeting into the fiery darkness below.

"Thanks," Six gasped, his knuckles white as he gripped Kaelen's sleeve.

"Save it for when we're airborne," Kaelen grimme-faced. "Vesper, how much further?"

"The lower munitions bay is just past the next junction," she replied, her voice remarkably steady despite the chaos. She cradled her left arm against her chest, her flesh-and-blood fingers wrapped tightly around the glowing, crystalline artefact they had sacrificed everything to retrieve: the Star. Its internal light pulsed with a fierce, rhythmic amber glow, mimicking a frantic heartbeat. "If Darrow hasn't panicked and left us behind, that is."

"Darrow doesn't panic," Kaelen muttered, though a cold knot of dread tightened in his stomach. "He just gets angry."

They rounded the final corner, practically sliding down a ramp that had warped into a steep incline. The heavy blast doors of the munitions bay were jammed half-open, sparks raining down from the buckled pneumatic tracks. Through the gap, the welcoming, ugly silhouette of the *Tin Queen* hove into view. The battered old gunship looked like a masterpiece of engineering amidst the ruin of the imperial palace. Her twin thrusters were already glowing a fierce, vibrant orange, whining with impatient power.

Darrow was leaning out of the cockpit hatch, his face flushed red beneath his grease-stained flight cap. "About bloody time!" he roared over the scream of the ship's engines. "The whole starboard side of this fortress is dragging us down! Get your misbegotten hides inside!"

"Go!" Kaelen shouted, shoving Six toward the boarding ramp.

The boy didn't need telling twice. He scrambled up the metal grating, disappearing into the cargo hold. Vesper followed close behind, guarding the Star with her body as she leaped over the threshold. Kaelen cast one final glance back at the corridor. The ceiling was collapsing in earnest now, burying a millennium of stolen wealth and tyrannical history beneath tons of suffocating debris. He vaulted into the ship just as Darrow slammed the hydraulic seal on the main hatch.

"Hold on to something!" Darrow's voice crackled over the cargo bay's tinny intercom. "This is going to be incredibly messy!"

The *Tin Queen* shot out of the Seat's eastern battery like a canister of grapeshot. Behind them, the fortress began its final, catastrophic descent.

Kaelen pulled himself up to the thick, reinforced viewport in the cargo bay. The sight took his breath away. The Imperial Seat, a floating mountain of stone, iron, and arrogance that had dominated the skies for ten centuries, was breaking apart. Below them, the thick, perpetual grey cloud layer rushed up to meet the falling leviathan. The Seat struck the upper atmosphere like a monumental blacksmith's hammer hitting an anvil. The shockwave rippled outward, tearing away the remaining spires and sending blinding sheets of white-hot friction fire tearing across its underbelly. And still, it kept falling.

From his vantage point, Kaelen watched as the Obsidian Spire, the very tower where the Imperator had issued his cruel edicts, cracked cleanly in half. It toppled in agonizingly slow motion, a monolithic needle of black stone vanishing into the churning sea of clouds below.

The violent turbulence finally subsided, replaced by the steady, comforting thrum of the *Tin Queen*'s cruising engines.

"It's done," Vesper said quietly.

Kaelen turned away from the viewport. She was sitting flat on the metal deck of the cargo bay, her back

resting against a stack of ammunition crates. The Star was cupped securely in her silver hand, its brilliant amber light illuminating the sharp lines of her face and the exhaustion etched around her eyes.

"The atmospheric grid is completely broken," she continued, her voice trembling slightly with a mixture of awe and disbelief. "The Imperator is dead. The empire or whatever pathetic remnants are left of it, will spend the next few decades in absolute chaos."

Kaelen leaned against the bulkhead, crossing his arms over his chest. His body ached, and his mind felt hollowed out by the sheer scale of what they had just unleashed. "That's not freedom, Vesper."

"No," Vesper agreed, looking up at him, a faint, weary smile touching her lips. "But it's the bloody brilliant beginning of it."

Six walked over from the weapon lockers, wiping a fresh layer of grease from his forehead with the back of his hand. "So, what happens now? Without the Seat enforcing the taxes, the lower districts will run out of rations within a month. The sky-pirates will be licking their lips."

"We face it," Kaelen said, his voice hardening with newfound resolve. "We didn't tear down a tyrant just to let the vultures pick at the bones. We build something better."

From the cockpit, Darrow called back, his tone uncharacteristically soft. "Hey, you lot might want to come up here and look at this."

Kaelen, Vesper, and Six crowded into the narrow cockpit, peering through the wide front windshield. They flew in absolute silence for a long time, the only sound the rhythmic thrum of the ship.

Below them, the sky was clearing. For the first time in their lives, the eternal, suffocating smog of the imperial engines was dissipating, torn apart by the high-altitude winds. The brutal, suffocating storm season was finally breaking. Far beneath the thinning mist, the true surface of the world, green, vast and untouched by the shadow of the Seat, began to reveal itself in the golden light of a brand-new dawn.

14. The Accounting

They landed at the Spire Market two days later. The bazaar was still there, clinging to the jagged rock face like a barnacle colony: the faded canvas tarpaulins, the heavy iron mooring rings, the familiar grease-heavy smell of roasted cloud-eel. But something fundamental had changed. The atmosphere was charged, lighter. At the corner of the promenade, the one-armed harpist was plucking a different song from his rusted strings, not the usual melancholic dirge for lost sailors, but a jubilant, chaotic tune about a captain who broke the world and let the sun in. Passers-by were dropping brass farthings into his cup with reckless, smiling generosity.

Dr Hesh was waiting for them.

He stood on the main wooden dock, his posture stiff, the brass-rimmed glass eye glinting in the newly unshielded daylight. His medical bag was slung over a shoulder that seemed narrower than before; he looked thinner, older, and yet very much alive.

"You're dead," Kaelen said, her voice cracking as she climbed down the *Tin Queen*'s landing ladder. Her boots struck the timber with a hollow thud.

"I hid in a pressure tank," Hesh said, his voice a dry rasp. "The Inquisitors walked right past me. I smelled so much of morphine and antiseptic they probably thought I was a corpse." He paused, his organic eye darting past her toward the ship's dark companionway. "Oren?"

Kaelen shook her head. Her throat clamped shut, preventing any words from escaping.

Hesh's jaw tightened, the skin stretching white over his cheekbones. He nodded once, a sharp, clinical acknowledgement of grief, then turned his gaze to Vesper, who had just stepped onto the deck. "The Star?"

"Spent," Vesper said. She held it up between them. The liquid silver that had once boiled with cosmic en-

ergy had gone opaque and milky, resembling a cataract on a dead eye. “It gave everything to break the grid. There’s nothing left inside it.”

“Then we bury it,” Hesh said, his tone switching to that of a pragmatist dealing with a biohazard. “Deep. Under the salt flats, where no one will ever dig.”

They didn’t bury it. Vesper kept it, wrapped in three layers of embroidered silk, inside a locked iron box beneath her bunk. She told Kaelen it was a reminder of the price they had paid. Kaelen, who could still hear the faint, phantom hum of the artefact through the floorboards at night, thought it was simply a ghost.

Over the next few weeks, they pieced together what was left of their fractured lives. The world was piecing itself together, too, stumbling out from under the shadow of the fallen regime.

Rennick’s body was never salvaged from the wreckage of the floating citadel; he had vanished into the ether along with his ambitions. Marrow’s salvaged charts, stained with tea and scorched at the edges, were formally gifted to a newly established free navigators’ guild in the lower sectors.

Oren’s brass lungs, the heavy, intricately geared apparatus that had kept her alive for a decade, were

buried on a windswept hill overlooking the jagged expanse of the Rustwall Rifts. Kaelen herself carved the headstone out of grey shale, chiselling the words: *She whistled when she breathed. Now the wind whistles for her.*

Six went back to the smoking ruins of the Imperial Seat. He spent twelve days searching the collapsed masonry and shattered glass for survivors, but he found none. He did not return empty-handed, however. When the iron-clad soldier marched back up the *Tin Queen*'s gangplank, he carried a single bronze mask, the cold, sneering face of a high-ranking Inquisitor. Without a word to anyone, he lashed it to the ship's bow with copper wire, a grim trophy to warn away any lingering imperial loyalists.

Darrow chose a quieter path, returning to his isolated monastery in the crags. A month after their arrival at the market, a courier delivered a thick parchment letter written in his precise, scholarly hand. Kaelen read it aloud to Vesper by the light of a whale-oil lamp:

The monks are teaching navigation again. Real navigation, the ancient ways of the stars, not the artificial currents of the aether grid. It is harder. It requires patience and mathematics. But it is better. We are learning to look at the sky without fear.

In the end, Kaelen stayed with Vesper. They had very little left: no money, no patrons, nothing but each other, a broken ship that bled oil from its starboard piston, and the memory of a dead star.

"What now?" Kaelen asked one evening.

They were sitting on the *Tin Queen*'s rusted upper deck, watching the vast banks of purple clouds drift across the horizon. For the first time in their lives, the sky above the clouds wasn't a murky, artificial yellow; it was a deep, terrifying indigo, pinpricked with the cold light of actual constellations.

Vesper was quiet for a long time, her fingers absently tracing the rivets on her mechanical silver hand. The metal clicked softly against her knuckles. "We find the others," she said finally.

Kaelen frowned, pulling her woollen coat tighter against the rising wind. "What others? The empire is gone, Vesper. The spires are falling apart."

"The empire is dead, but tyranny isn't," Vesper replied, turning her sharp eyes toward Kaelen. "There are always new tyrants waiting in the wings. Petty warlords, corrupt merchants, men who want to build new

cages out of the old iron. Look at the lower docks, they are already trying to tax the fresh water."

She held up her silver hand, letting the starlight catch the polished metal.

"We have this," Vesper continued, her voice dropping to a fierce, quiet intensity. "And we have the memory of what we did. We proved that the gods can bleed, Kaelen. That is a weapon. That is a story people need to hear when they start to lose hope."

Kaelen looked up at the immense, untamed sky. Somewhere out there, the residual glow of the Harrow Star's final blast was fading into the cosmic background. Somewhere else, millions of people were breathing free, unmetered air for the very first time in three generations. And somewhere else, there was always more work to be done.

She let out a long breath, watching it mist in the cool night air. The grief for Oren and the others hadn't left her, but the weight of it felt manageable now, balanced by a strange, new momentum.

"Tomorrow," Kaelen said, leaning her shoulder against Vesper's. "We start tomorrow."

Vesper smiled, a rare, genuine expression that softened the hard lines of her face. “Tomorrow.”

15. The New World

Six months passed. The Empire fractured into a hundred petty kingdoms, each claiming the high throne, each tearing at the others for control of what remained. The dreaded weather cannons stayed silent, their brass housings tarnished by neglect. The patrol skiffs stayed grounded, their engines stripped for scrap. And in the vast, silent spaces between the warring factions, ordinary people began to build.

Kaelen watched it happen from the deck of a new ship, a heavy frigate she'd salvaged from a rusted scrapyard in the low-altitude clouds, rebuilt with Darrow's

ink-stained navigation charts and Oren's meticulously detailed engineering notes. She called her the *Scratch's Daughter*. She was a patchwork beast of iron ribs and canvas wings, but she was sturdy.

Vesper stood beside her as first mate, her dark coat whipping in the gale. Dr Hesh was down in the galley, acting as the ship's surgeon and brewing a notoriously bitter chicory tea. Six was down in the hold, the resident lockpicker, forger, and thief, currently trying to rekey a set of stolen imperial footlockers. They had a new crew too, a dozen volunteers from the Spire Market, the Smokefall Rebels, and the newly freed factories. Most of them were people who had never left the solid rock of the lower rings, now learning to read the shifting typography of the open sky.

"Hold her steady!" Kaelen shouted over the roar of the wind, her knuckles white on the bronze spokes of the helm. "The thermal updraft from the burning valleys will push us left if you let it!"

A young recruit from the factories, a lad named Jax whose hands were still stained with machine oil, gripped the secondary guide-lines. "She's pulling hard, Captain! The pressure in the aft ballast is rising!"

"Bleed it off, Jax! Just a touch," Kaelen called back, her voice calm but firm. "Listen to the hull. She'll tell you when she's happy."

They weren't stealing artefacts anymore. The age of high-stakes air-heists had died with the Emperor. Instead, they ran vital medical supplies to blockaded towns, ferried exhausted refugees across contested skies, and taught anyone who would listen how to navigate the heavens without an imperial grid network. They were teaching the world how to be free.

Later that evening, the fierce winds died down to a gentle, humming breeze. The sky turned the colour of bruised plums and spun gold. Vesper walked up the companionway to the quarterdeck, two metal mugs of Dr Hesh's tea in her hands. She offered one to Kaelen, who accepted it with a grateful nod.

"The crew is settling in," Vesper said, leaning her back against the brass railing and watching Kaelen at the helm. "Jax actually managed to splice a rigging line without tying his own fingers together."

Kaelen took a sip, wincing slightly at the taste. "Hesh is getting worse at making tea, but better at resetting bones. I suppose it's a fair trade-off."

Vesper looked out over the vast expanse of clouds below them. The fires of a distant skirmish flickered on the horizon, tiny and harmless from this height. "You've become a hero to them, you know. To all of them."

Kaelen shook her head, a small, wry smile touching her lips. "No. I've become a pilot, Vesper. That's all I ever wanted to be. Just a girl who knows how to catch a current."

"The stories in the Spire Market say otherwise," Vesper replied, her tone softening. "They say you're the one who broke the grid. The one who gave the sky back to the people."

"The grid was already breaking. I just pulled the loose thread," Kaelen murmured. She adjusted the trim lever, feeling the subtle shift in the ship's buoyancy. "If people want to make a legend out of a mechanic with a stolen map, let them. As long as they keep paying for the lift-gas."

Vesper looked at her for a long moment, the hard, guarded expression she had worn for years completely absent. "Your father would be proud of this ship. He would be proud of you."

Kaelen's throat tightened, the sudden phantom taste of coal dust and engine grease filling her mouth. She thought of him kneeling on the cracked tarmac of the burning aerodrome, his face smeared with soot, looking at her with eyes that desperately screamed *run*. She had run. She had run all the way to the absolute edge of the world and back again, carrying the weight of his sacrifice in every breath.

"He'd tell me to stop being sentimental," Kaelen said, her voice dropping an octave as she fought back the sudden prickle of tears. "And he'd tell me to check the lift-gas pressure in the primary envelope before the night chill sets in."

Vesper laughed, a real, resonant laugh that echoed off the canvas sails, not the sharp, glacier-crack sound of their early days in the rebellion. It was the sound of someone who had finally stepped out of the shadow of the gallows.

"He sounds like he was an incredibly practical man," Vesper said, wiping a stray tear of mirth from her eye.

"He was a riveter," Kaelen said softly, her gaze drifting up to the patch of dark leather she had sewn into the ship's main steering leather, a piece from her father's old welding apron. "He didn't care about empires

or thrones. He just fixed things that were broken."

Below them, Six stuck his head out of the hatch, a heavy silver pocket watch dangling triumphantly from his fingers. "Hey! Captain! Look what was hiding in the imperial commander's lockbox! Do you think Hesh can trade this for some tea leaves that don't taste like pond water?"

"Put it back, Six!" Kaelen called down, though there was no real anger in her voice. "Or at least log it in the manifest before you try to sell it!"

"Log it? Since when do we log things?" Six groaned, though he vanished back into the hold with a grin.

Kaelen turned the wheel slightly, aligning the *Scratch's Daughter* with the fading crimson glow on the horizon. They sailed straight into the sunset. Not because it was poetic or grand, but because the wind was good, the rigging was taut, and for the first time in their lives, the horizon was completely empty.

16. The Harrow Star

One year after the ash had finally settled over the ruins of the Imperial Seat, Kaelen returned to the Rustwall Rifts.

She came alone, piloting a borrowed, sputtering skiff that reeked of cheap grease and old copper. She had left the *Scratch's Daughter* moored three hundred yards above, safely tied to the iron-toothed rings of the Spire Market. Her departure had not been quiet. Vesper had protested loudly, her boots pacing a furious rhythm across the deckboards. Six had offered to accompany her, silently polishing the cams of his heavy arbalest in a way that meant he was prepared to

shoot anything that looked at her sideways. Even Dr. Hesh had intervened, waving a tincture of blue valerian and prescribing a heavy sedative for what he called "melancholic recklessness."

Kaelen had ignored them all. Some debts could not be paid in company.

She guided the skiff down, descending into the choked, yellow fog of the Rifts. The air grew thick, tasting of sulphur and oxidized iron. Past the broken spires that once held the sky-rail, past the skeletal, half-collapsed bridges where the Imperial infantry had made their final, brutal stand, she drifted. She kept her eyes fixed downward until she found the exact shelf of rock where her father had died.

The old aerodrome was gone, entirely buried under a mountain of iron rubble and flaking rust. Yet the memory of that morning remained perfectly intact, sharp as a shard of obsidian lodged in her mind.

She cut the skiff's thrusters, letting the vessel groan against the landing pier. Stepping out onto the corroded plating, she walked to the edge of the platform and knelt where he had knelt. The wind howled through the lattice towers, a low, grieving whistle. She said nothing. There was nothing left to say to the dead that

hadn't already been screamed into the void during the war.

Instead, she reached into the heavy leather pocket of her coat and withdrew the Harrow Star.

Vesper had slipped it to her the night before, their fingers brushing in the dim light of the aft cabin. *"It's dead,"* Vesper had murmured, her voice uncharacteristically soft, devoid of its usual privateer grit. *"The core is spent, Kaelen. But it's still yours. You're the one who dragged it out of the dark. You earned it."*

Kaelen turned the artefact over in her weathered palms. It felt remarkably cold now, opaque, lifeless, a heavy sphere of dull silver that looked more like a discarded canister bearing than an engine of cosmic power. No violet light pulsed from its geometric grooves. No aetheric frequencies hummed against her skin to turn her teeth to glass. It was just a relic. A pretty, heavy stone.

Slowly, she placed it on the fractured ground, right where her father's blood had soaked into the porous ironstone a decade ago.

"This is for you," she whispered, her voice barely carrying over the wind. "For every riveter who fell from

the high scaffolding. For every scavenger choked out by the gas leaks. For everyone who died on their knees while the high-born watched from their gardens."

She stood up, wiping the rust dust from her trousers. The fog swirled aggressively around her ankles, but high above, a rare miracle was happening: the perpetual grease-clouds were parting, and the sun was breaking through in long, lancing beams of pale amber.

She didn't look back at the Star. She left it there, nesting in the rust and the memory of the fallen. Let some wandering scrapper find it a century from now. Let someone else decide what to do with the compass of a dead god.

Kaelen climbed back into the skiff, cranked the stubborn ignition until the engine caught with a wet roar, and flew back up toward the light.

The *Scratch's Daughter* was waiting for her, her great canvas sails furled tightly against her double-masts. As Kaelen brought the skiff into the docking bay, the familiar, chaotic rhythm of her life rose to greet her. Vesper was already leaning over the starboard rail, her brass spyglass tucked under one arm, her expression a tight mix of anxiety and relief. Six was perched on a nearby crate, meticulously tuning the heavy tension

wires of his crossbow, the rhythmic *thrum-thrum* acting as a familiar metronome. From the galley hatch, the distinct, burnt-toast aroma of Dr. Hesh's terrible chicory coffee drifted across the deck. Near the mainmast, three new crew members, scrawny kids rescued from the lower docks, were fumbling with a heavy hawser, trying desperately to learn how to tie a proper reef knot under the boatswain's watchful eye.

"Well?" Vesper asked, stepping down from the gunwale as Kaelen vaulted onto the main deck. Her dark eyes searched Kaelen's face for any sign of a break.

"It's done," Kaelen said, pulling off her flying gloves.

Vesper glanced toward the empty skiff. "And the Star?"

"Gone."

Vesper nodded once, a sharp, clean motion. She didn't ask where, and she didn't ask how. She didn't need to. The past was a heavy anchor, and they had finally cut the chain.

Kaelen walked past her, scaling the wooden steps to the quarterdeck, and took the iron-spoked helm in her hands. The wood felt warm, grooved by her own palms over thousands of leagues. The wind up here

was fresh, tasting of high-altitude salt and untamed currents. The lingering smog of the Empire's old factories was clearing away, chased by a western gale. Ahead of them, the horizon stretched out into an impossible infinity, uncharted, ungoverned and entirely free.

"Set course for the Toothstorm Trench," Kaelen called out, her voice ringing clear across the deck. "I hear there's a settlement out on the jagged rim that needs medical supplies and clean water."

Vesper jogged up the steps, a faint, dangerous smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "The Toothstorm? That's three weeks' sail through some of the nastiest thermal shears in the hemisphere, Captain."

Kaelen gripped the wheel, feeling the great ship thrum beneath her boots, eager to run. "Then we'd better get started. Cast off those lines!"

The *Scratch's Daughter* rose majestically into the sky, her immense sails catching the wind with a sound like thunder. Below them, the grim, jagged teeth of the Rustwall Rifts faded into a harmless gray mist, shrinking until they were nothing more than a smudge on the world's crust.

Above them, the sky was changing. The stars were coming out, not the artificial, violet-hued aetheric ghosts of the old Imperial navigation grid, but the real stars. The ancient ones. The cold, brilliant diamonds that the pre-imperial navigators had followed for a thousand years before the tyrants built their cages.

Kaelen looked up at them, the starlight catching the tears she hadn't allowed herself to shed down in the dark. She smiled.

She was still angry; angry enough to keep her hands steady on the wheel. But she was steady enough to finally be free.

And the sky had no chains.

The End

The Harrow Star

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He looked at her just once, his grey eyes flashing a final, desperate command ...run.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

The Harrow Star

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED